

DEALING with a DEADLY LEGACY

Aussie Soldiers Clearing Land Mines
in Afghanistan

Marcus Fielding



ECHO BOOKS



Daryl Crichton sporting a beard and a koala at Pesbawar in 1992.

This book is dedicated to those Australian Army
United Nations Mine Clearance Training Team members
who have since died:

Ross John Chamberlain

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Darrell William Crichton

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In what is probably the most extraordinary and hazardous circumstances ever faced by Australian soldiers, ninety-two combat engineers helped to clear minefields in the midst of an ongoing civil war.

Unarmed, dressed in mufti, disguised with beards and working through interpreters they helped to forge local expertise.

Adding to the risks they had only a medic on hand in the event of becoming the victim of a mine blast; and the nearest hospital was over a full day's drive away.

How none of them were killed or injured is remarkable.

These Australian Army soldiers were working as part of a United Nations humanitarian mine clearance program in Pakistan and Afghanistan between 1989 and 1993.

They blazed a path for future humanitarian land mine clearance efforts around the world.

Telling the extraordinary story of this operation and the men who participated in it is the objective of this book. The Australian Government's Official History of this operation was published in 2011 and provides a great level of detail of the government processes and decisions. But as an official document, the inclusion of more descriptive and personal stories

was not appropriate. This book seeks to complement the Official History and provide a more personal (and colourful) account.

It will seek to do this by sharing memories from the participants in their own words and by providing explanation where necessary or appropriate. Coupled with photographs, maps and background 'fact boxes' it is hoped that their story can be sufficiently captured for posterity.

As each of the participants followed a common experience of being deployed and later returning to Australia the book is arranged in chapters that follow these stages; that is the chapters are titled Selection (for the deployment), Pre-deployment (training and preparation), Orientation (on arrival in Pakistan), Working (in Pakistan and in Afghanistan), Rest and Recreation, Going Home and Reflections (retrospective views on the deployment).

But first, a short summary of the UN Mine Clearance Program in Pakistan and Afghanistan between 1989 and 1993 is a good place to begin telling the story.

The UN Mine Clearance Program

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan (UNOCA) established the mine clearance training program in early 1989. The US, France and Turkey dispatched military contingents that started work at Risalpur in February 1989. The Pakistani Army Corps of Engineers provided support to the training program.

Courses were conducted for selected groups of Afghan refugees—predominantly adult males. The courses were initially three days long and focused on land mine and UXO recognition and avoidance techniques. The expectation was that refugee families would soon return to Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal and that these skills would enable them to enhance their safety.

Contingents from Canada, Italy and Norway joined the effort soon after, followed by New Zealand, the UK and Australia. The NZ and Australian governments referred to their contingents as being part of the UN Mine Clearance Training Team (UNMCTT)—even though the

UN used the term 'Operation Salam' to refer to the overall humanitarian program. Some national contingents were also located at a second training camp near Quetta in southern Pakistan.

The intention was for these trained personnel to voluntarily repatriate to Afghanistan and undertake mine and UXO clearance on their own initiative. Two major factors contributed to change the UN's approach to mine clearance operations in Afghanistan:

- The expectation that the Afghan refugees would return to Afghanistan *en masse*, however, proved false with the continuation of the fighting between the Soviet-backed Afghan regime with the factious Afghan Mujahideen; and
- A realisation that the socio-economic impact of land mine contamination was simply too large and complex a problem to be left to individuals and ad-hoc clearance efforts; a large scale nationally coordinated approach was needed to assist the rehabilitation strategy for Afghanistan.

Over time the training courses were extended to include techniques to safely extract people from mined areas or from mine incidents, and basic techniques to destroy land mines and UXO using explosives. The Pakistani Army and Inter-Services Intelligence would vet the students who had been nominated by one of the political parties associated with the Afghans. At the completion of the 17 days of training students were issued a canvas bag containing basic tools to perform these tasks and a basic first aid kit. Student were also required to sign an oath declaring that they would only use the knowledge and skills they had been taught for humanitarian purposes.

In November 1989 the Australian government accepted responsibility for technical advice and training of Afghan non-government organisations (NGOs) to undertake a trial of large scale and coordinated mine clearance operations under the management of the UNOCA mine clearance program. The first demining teams from Afghan Technical Consultants deployed into Afghanistan in early January 1990.

Throughout 1990 and 1991 it became clear that a large-scale centrally coordinated approach to mine clearance was feasible and security conditions in Afghanistan were sufficiently stable for UNOCA to expand on the trial of an organised demining effort. This was achieved with the formation of a number of NGOs whose actions were coordinated through regional demining offices in Peshawar, Quetta and later Kabul—the Afghan capital.

With the formal establishment of this ‘Demining’ (a new term) Program, Australia extended its tours for UNMCTT members to six months and also began providing additional officers on 12-month long tours as Technical Advisors with the various Afghan NGOs involved in the program.

Under the Demining Program, training for the Afghans was broadened to include the surveying, planning, conduct and supervision of mine clearance activities. One of the Afghan NGOs also specialised in providing mine and unexploded awareness training to refugees.

As forces were building up in Kuwait for the first Gulf War in late 1990 and early 1991, the risk to the western national contingents in Peshawar and Quetta become more acute and over the space of a few months all the national contingents except those from New Zealand and Australia ceased contributing to the program.

In early 1991, the Australian Army officer who was the Technical Advisor to Afghan Technical Consultants began travelling into Afghanistan to inspect demining operations and provide feedback into the training regime. From mid-1991 other members of the UNMCTT began to travel to inspect and expanding program of demining operations in Afghanistan. By late-1991 the New Zealanders finished their contribution and only the Australian contingent remained.

The long-term aim for the Demining Program was for it to become completely run by Afghans with no requirement for expatriate military assistance. Consequently, Afghans also became Demining Instructors in their own right and progressively took over the conduct of training. Throughout 1992 each of the Afghan NGOs in the Demining Program

continued to grow in size and expertise. Increasingly Afghans took on responsibility for the planning and administration of the NGOs.

By 1993, the Demining Program had achieved a good degree of momentum and it was assessed by the Australian Government that the support from Australian contingents was no longer necessary—although several expatriate civilians continued to hold some appointments. Consequently, the last Australian contingent completed its tour of duty in mid-1993 and the last Australian technical advisors completed their tours at the end of 1993.

The Soviet-Afghan War 1979-1989

The Soviet–Afghan War lasted over nine years, from December 1979 to February 1989. Insurgent groups known collectively as the mujahideen, as well as smaller Maoist groups, fought a guerrilla war against the Soviet Army and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan government, mostly in the rural countryside.

The mujahideen groups were backed primarily by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, making it a Cold War proxy war. Between 562,000 and 2,000,000 civilians were killed and millions of Afghans fled the country as refugees, mostly to Pakistan and Iran.

Prior to the arrival of Soviet troops, Afghanistan's communist party took power after a 1978 coup, installing Nur Mohammad Taraki as president. The party initiated a series of radical modernization reforms throughout the country that were deeply unpopular, particularly among the more traditional rural population and the established traditional power structures.

The government's Stalinist-like nature of vigorously suppressing opposition, executing thousands of political

CHAPTER FIVE

WORKING IN PAKISTAN

The first five contingents worked at Risalpur—some 45 km from Peshawar. They would usually have a very early start to drive to Risalpur and start training early in the morning. Because it got so hot the training usually finished up around lunch-time. The contingent members would then return to Peshawar. The working week was Sunday through to Thursday as Friday was the Muslim holy day.

Courses were run in three languages—Pashto, Urdu and Dari—to accommodate the student body. Even then, some students weren't in a position to understand any of these languages. Often the students were illiterate so they were not able to read or do any sums. This presented a problem in determining the length of time fuse to be attached to an explosive demolition charge.

'The demining program had been initiated by the ex-Afghan Army Colonel Kefayatullah Eblagh. To his credit he attracted considerable resources from the UN, Pakistani Military, and overseas countries. It was his role to manage the complex political situation. Amazingly given the past decades of upheaval, the Afghan Technical Consultants has grown in capabilities and still operating in Afghanistan. He personified the very best in his culture's hospitality and politeness. One could spend all day arguing with him as to who was going to pass through the door

first. 'No, you, no you first.' Eventually, we would have to give up and go through the door first. We were incredibly naïve about cultural norms. Kefayatullah once visited our team house. It was very hot on the day and to my everlasting regret I greeted him in shorts and shirt, whereas we should have rushed off and dressed formally covering up.

Kefayatullah often introduced us to leading mujahidin figures. Many went on to be famous and/or notorious depending on your point of view. Towards the end of our engagement, Kefayatullah invited me for lunch at his house. I was ushered from the bright sun light into a modest mud brick building and into a very dark room. As my eyes accustomed to the darkness, I found there were about fifteen leading mujahidin leaders in the room. All were covered in ammunition belts and carrying AK-47 assault rifles. All were clearly Afghan except for a very tall man dressed in white who I was told was from Saudi Arabia. We sat on an ancient Afghan Filpai (elephant's foot motif) carpet of dark reds and blues that filled the room. A parade of Afghan dishes was brought into the room. There was much discussion of which my beginner Pashtu was not helpful. I consoled myself to enjoying the food and making an effort to at least try everything even if it didn't look as though it would have passed an Australian food test.

We were determined to rectify the lack of knowledge about mines and ordinance in Afghanistan. Apart from being essential information in the day to day running of demining, we wanted to raise the level of understanding in the wider Australian Army. With the shiny new (expensive) computer we set about writing detailed documents on the mines we found. We also started to collect and record information from our students on how the Soviets and the Mujahidin had deployed mines in Afghanistan. This work resulted in a multi volume book that detailed every mine that had been deployed in Afghanistan, its technical specifications, deployment, and suggested demining. The books were supported by photos. Carl and Paul led the book production. Arnie Palmer led the initiative to film each of the contingent providing training briefs on each of the mines.

In our spare time, the contingent set about collecting examples of everything we could get our hands on. The mines would then be used as practice mines in the training. Visits to local arms bazars were the key sources we relied on. If the arms traders didn't have something, then we could put in an order. A couple of weeks later whatever we asked for would turn up. During our three months we collected samples of every mine deployed in Afghanistan. Most were Soviet but some were from other conflict zones. Many of the newer Soviet mines had never been seen before. Our team of qualified explosive ordinance disposal experts set about the dangerous task of disarming the mines and removing the explosives. Although risky I had total confidence in the team. All the same we took precautions just in case. The American team of special forces unfortunately were not as well qualified. Some of them were inspecting a mine in their team house when it exploded. Fortunately, they only had minor injuries but some of them had to be medevac'd home.

Of particular pleasure was the humour of the Afghans. We found that the Australians and Afghans had a similar sense of humour. Any opportunity for some humour or a joke was taken. The Afghan students had a fatalistic view of the future. Whilst serious students, they took every opportunity to enjoy the time they had. In their view, the future was in Allah's hands. It is hard to imagine that many of them have survived the decades of turmoil since the demining training.'

Graham Costello, 1st Contingent

'I was asked to go and have a chat with the 'engineer' from one of the mujahideen groups. They had discovered and finally managed to recover something they had never seen before. I didn't recognise it either but we took some photos and measurements. Later we were told that it was a VP-12/13—a nasty little device that controls the electric detonation of several anti-personnel mines based on the triangulation from two geophones. The reason that it had taken so long to recover one of these was that everyone who had tried was killed. The one that had been recovered had apparently malfunctioned or the battery had run flat.'

Carl Chirgwin, 1st Contingent

‘One day I was asked to help identify the remnants of a SCUD missile that had apparently been recently fired over the border from Afghanistan to somewhere near Peshawar.’

Carl Chirgwin, 1st Contingent

‘We never really worked out how it got there or why but one day the Kiwis noticed a disturbed area on the path between the firing point and the target area. It turned out that there was a freshly planted anti-personnel mine there...’

Carl Chirgwin, 1st Contingent

‘In the early days were still casting around for ideas on how to achieve wide area mine clearance with high degrees of assurance. One of the British fellows in Quetta put forward a suggestion to use marksmen to fire at the mines. Of course, the mujahideen had been doing this throughout the war to get out of mined areas. But to achieve humanitarian standards i.e. 99% assurance it wasn’t going to be good enough.’

Paul Petersen, 1st Contingent

‘Nearly every male refugee claimed to be Mujahideen. It didn’t matter if they were eight or eighty years old. Being a warrior was a badge of honour. I understand that Osama bin Laden lived in Peshawar in the late 1980s and established Al-Qaeda there. But he wasn’t advertising for recruits in the local paper. Some of the Afghan instructors at our camp had no desire to go back to Afghanistan to clear landmines. They made comparatively good money as an instructor—about 4,000 rupees per month. That was a lot more than a civil engineer could earn in Afghanistan.’

Paul Petersen, 1st Contingent

‘The senior military officer for the Demining Program in Peshawar was a US Army Lieutenant Colonel Larry. He was the most indecisive and incompetent officer I have worked with. He would sweat when faced with simple decisions, and was incapable of dealing with anything serious. I have always assumed he was sent to Peshawar by the US Army because it was the most remote posting they could find. The local UN headquarters was a model of grinding bureaucracy. The Chief



Imants 'Monty' Avotins (left) instructs Afghan students on the use of explosives at Risalpur in 1989.

of Staff would neither decide nor delegate. He only knew how to delay and dither. There was a lot of tension at the headquarters. They weren't used to Australians.'

Paul Petersen, 1st Contingent

'I think our Australian instructors were excellent. It wasn't just their knowledge; it was their ability to engage the trainees. Some of the other teams were patronising, but not ours. Some of the training teams from other countries were so bad that their interpreters did most of the training for them. The Americans were professional, but they were Special Forces, and I always thought there was a deeper agenda attached to their work. They could speak Pushto and Farsi, but that didn't mean they could relate to their trainees.'

Paul Petersen, 1st Contingent

'We had bugged all equipment and the mine detectors we had were pretty average. There was no shortage of gun runners trying to flog kit to the UN. On one occasion, we received a shipment of 'treasure finder' mine detectors from the

American company Radio Shack. They could detect coins etc., and were toy detectors marketed at children. Try telling that to UN Headquarters or Lieutenant Colonel Larry L. They thought we should be using them operationally. I was stunned. I can't imagine what Monty Avotins or Bob Kudyba would have said if they had known. I sent the treasure finders back to Islamabad with a rude note. Lieutenant Colonel Larry was furious with me.'

Paul Petersen, 1st Contingent



A group of Afghan students learning to use a metal detector at Risalpur in 1992.

'The first contingent was very much challenged with a steep learning curve as we arrived and were expected to get cracking into a project that nobody had really sat down and thought through...so we were literally making the rules of the training up as we went along.'

Bob Kudyba, 1st Contingent

'As there was little to no guidelines on what to train the classes of Afghans on, we sat down and looked at the basic military doctrine on landmine breaching teams; these drills date back to the Second World War and were based upon the idea of

manually clearing the ground out from a known 'safe' area-that is an area where mines were known not to be. Military clearance was also aided (in the case of countries abiding by the Geneva protocols on mine warfare) by the fact mined areas were to be marked by signs and also wire barriers. However, this protocol was not adhered to by those nations who were not signatories to the Geneva protocol, nor was the protocol observed by various dissident, or guerrilla groups.

Military breaching drills were also inclusive of protection parties so that the men undertaking the actual clearance didn't have to also concentrate on carrying a rifle and associated kit as well as clearing the ground. So, we dropped all the protection party stuff and just focused on the people doing actual clearance. This would need people to prod the ground across a front of say, one metre width, and then investigate any finds they had. It would be slow tedious stuff and they would also need to clearly show what area had been subjected to clearance and what was not done. So, the military idea of using rope, or tapes either side of the clearer were used.

At this stage the only way the ground could be investigated was via prodding, as there were no metal detectors available. As the Afghans were not trained in ordnance, it was decided to avoid worrying about trying to disarm any mines found and simply mark these for the time being and then withdraw and commence a new clearance area next to the one where the mine had been found.

The training programs were delivered at a Pakistani army camp situated at Risalpur; about a fifty-minute drive from Peshawar. The training was delivered in English and then, with the use of Pakistani army staff, was translated into Pashto.

Each contingent had a class of approximately thirty students who were managed and organised by the Pakistani army staff member. This class had a heavy canvas tent to cater for its training and these tents were grouped in an area so each national contingent was training their class in the same area. When the Australian contingent arrived, there were national contingents from USA, UK, New Zealand, Canada, Italy,

CHAPTER SIX

WORKING IN AFGHANISTAN

The second five contingents still continued to oversee the training courses at Risalpur but over time this responsibility was taken over by the Afghan instructors who had been trained. The UNMCTT members were increasingly used to conduct quality assurance visits to demining teams working in Afghanistan and to also run refresher courses for them in-situ. The last contingents ran a number of demining training courses in Herat in the west of Afghanistan.

‘It was during the first month or so of my posting [February 1991] that I actually travelled inside Afghanistan and, like a kid in a lolly shop, I wanted to see and do everything, largely ignoring the dangers. One day I travelled with nine of our staff into the south-eastern part of the country to see some real demining taking place. First, we loaded up four Nissan Patrol vehicles, each equipped with VHF and HF radios, as in the 1990’s satellite telephones were still huge, cumbersome affairs and very expensive to buy and use.

We headed out of Peshawar and into the tribal areas after first passing a check post of Pakistani border guards that was located well to the south of the main border crossing at Torkham. After a couple of hours driving into the mountains, we came to the border check post. After some discussion between our

team and the border guards, we were let past. It was clear from the facial expressions of the border guards that they didn't see many red-haired foreigners dressed in shalwar kameez coming through their post.

At one point, just after passing the border guards, we paused on some high ground in the mountains and looked over a wide valley, with a clear track seen in the far distance. With my military eyes scanning the horizon I saw two Soviet vehicles, a T55 tank and a BRDM scout vehicle, destroyed and now stationary beside the track in the distance. I admit, even today, a smile emerges on my face and I can feel the eagerness yet that little bit of concern I had going into this wild and risky place.'

Graeme Membrey, Technical Advisor
and first Australian Army member to travel into Afghanistan

'I looked across at the two Pashtuns riding in the car with me and thought of the hundreds of deminers working out there. They were a proud and good-looking race of people. Most of the men were tall and well-muscled with an athletic presence about them. They had Aryan looks with thick, dark eyebrows and an ostensibly strong nose! All had lengthy hair which was the style of the day and wore the mandatory Islamic type of beard that was thick, relatively long and almost always jet black. Typically, they would wear some form of headdress, either a turban, Chitrali hat, or more often a turban tied around their heads.'

Graeme Membrey, Technical Advisor

'There were surprisingly very few other cars on the road as we continued to drive and I guessed we only passed three or four vehicles heading towards us, with about the same going in our direction. All were beaten up, old Toyota pick-ups, mostly filled with armed men, though we also saw a few of the very old Yak 4x4s, which were Soviet era vehicles and resembled those seen in WW2 movies. As a military guy who had studied Soviet military machinery, aircraft, ships and vehicles for several years without ever actually seeing any, the T55, BRDM and these Yak 4x4s were a real treat'

Graeme Membrey, Technical Advisor



The border crossing at Torkham in 1992.

At about 5.30 pm we all went inside for the ubiquitous formal greeting and cups of chai. As the general banter and standard complimenting continued, some huge, somewhat scary looking men entered the room. However, to my surprise, they displayed the humblest of manners and started to lay out plate, after plate, after plate of wonderful local foods. The men trod gently across the matting on the floor, always bent down to maintain their humility, as they placed out the food and poured each of us cups of tea. They didn't look anyone in the eyes, except if they were spoken to. They appeared, whilst performing these acts of submission, to be extremely humble and accommodating. This type of behaviour, from grown and mature fighting men, never ceased to amaze me throughout the country although it was a cultural issue for them and never seemed to be demeaning in any way.

As this wonderful loading of food was laid before us, I admit I was starving as we had left Peshawar at about 10 am and I hadn't eaten anything of substance all day. There was roast chicken, meat (I foolishly thought it was lamb, but as would become usual, was goat), rice, more rice, tomatoes, onions, and flat bread the size of a rugby jumper. After a quick Islamic prayer, we began to

eat. As was to become the norm, I was encouraged to eat by all those around me. If I paused to catch my breath, another leg of chicken or pile of rice was pushed in front of me. Now, please understand, I'm not so tall, but I can be a big eater and this late afternoon or early evening, I really ate my fill. I washed down the goat meat with green tea (chia subz), chomped on the chicken pieces and swallowed rice like water. The cooked potato and the salad dishes all took my fancy as did the kebab meat, the flat naan bread, the local yoghurt and the fruits. By now I was pickled and more than a little bloated. I had eaten my fill and now felt 'fat and happy.'

Graeme Membrey, Technical Advisor



A collection of 'war booty' at a Mujahideen compound near Khost in 1992.

'The minefields were surveyed and marked with rocks painted red. In the early days they were marked with steel pickets and wire but these items were very useful and valuable and soon disappeared. But nobody wanted more rocks so once they were placed and painted, they usually stayed in place. When an area was cleared, we painted the red over with white paint.'

Graeme Membrey, Technical Advisor