



Painted rocks marking possible landmine sites are seen in and around Bagram. They're painted red for danger and white for safe. Rocks painted both colors tell you which side of the rock to stay on.

“Demining” way saves lives

By Brenda L. Beasley

Employees in Afghanistan Engineer District's Bagram Area Office are receiving valuable demining safety training. They are learning why it's important to “*stay on the tracks*” when moving in and around Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan.

Bagram Airfield is a militarized airport and housing complex located next to the ancient city of Bagram, southeast of Charikar in the Parwan province of Afghanistan that has been

riddled with landmines, according to historical accounts. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s the Soviet military sowed hundreds of thousands of mines throughout the country, especially around Bagram to protect their strategic air base. Afghan rebels battling the Soviets also scattered mines in and around Bagram. Further mine-laying was done by the communist regime of Najibullah, during localized fighting between Mujahideen groups. And,

even more mines were laid by the Taliban and the Northern Alliance during their years of fighting.

All of these defending forces laid landmines to protect their main supply routes (particularly the road north from Kabul to the old Soviet border), their airfields, military posts around key towns, and the actual front lines. The geography of the conflict meant that different factions have frequently mined the same areas at different times.



Red triangular signs have been placed in and around Bagram by Coalition Forces to inform people where not to tread.

Although Coalition Forces and nongovernment organizations are working extensively to clear the landmines, danger still lurks everywhere in this area that was home to over 20 years of deadly fighting. Experts estimate that 11 percent of the country is still full of live mines.

One of the tragic legacies from this fighting is the millions of people who have been maimed or killed by landmines. To help protect Corps of Engineers employees and contractors working in and around Bagram, BAO Officer in Charge Lt. Col. Fredric E. Kaehler pushes demining safety awareness. “Never assume an area is mine free,” he said. “And, don’t go where there aren’t clearly established tracks.”

Particular things to notice around the work area are

disturbed surfaces, dead animals with blast injuries, round, regularly spaced potholes or craters, containers or boxes in the vicinity, mine accessories, and markings such as stacked rocks placed by locals and triangular danger signs placed by coalition forces. If something appears to be an Unexploded Ordnance, “Don’t move it or touch it,” said Kaehler. “Mark it with a visible object to warn others, record the location and report it accordingly.”

They’re usually found in the vicinity of all berms (main one and old ones); around wells; around shade trees; around bottlenecks; at the edges of cleared roads and tracks; near abandoned defensive positions; ahead of old and new defensive lines; around any old battlefield; and around natural defensive positions.

In his Mine Awareness

Do’s

- Avoid mines, UXOs, and battlefield debris;
- Stay on tracks or on well-marked road;
- If encountered, only get close enough to see what it is, mark near the vicinity, then record and report;
- When in a convoy, keep at least 50 meters between vehicles;
- Observe local movement and activity;
- Speak to locals;
- Ensure all members of a patrol can render assistance; and
- Carry first aid kit; ensure it’s complete.

Don’ts

- Do not touch!
- Do not assume an area is mine-free unless its truly cleared and verified;
- Do not assume all mine laying was accomplished using the same method;
- Do not disturb or throw anything;
- Do not look for or touch ammo, mines or UXOs;
- Do not touch suspicious items; beware of booby traps;
- Do not continue driving if you have limited visibility or you’ve lost the track! Reverse on your own tracks back to larger tracks; and
- Never run into an incident; follow vehicle tracks to the vehicle or clear a lane to the casualty. Record all information about the mine/UXO.

presentation, Kaehler stresses the Do’s and the Don’ts to stay safe.

When at construction sites where there is digging or excavating by power equipment in areas that are known to have possible buried UXOs, precautions must be in place beforehand to ensure the safety of all personnel, according to Rocky A. Nelson, a construction representative in the BAO.

Digging should only proceed after the area has been certified by the Mine Action Center. However,



At the conclusion of their Jan. 16 meeting, Lt. Col. Fredric Kaehler (center) lights the candles on the cake as BAO employees prepare to celebrate January birthdays.



BAO employees pose for a group shot.

certification by the MAC only extends six inches below the surface grade. “Since most excavations are below that distance,” said Nelson, “proper awareness will increase safety.”

Bombings in Bagram have little effect on anti-personnel mines, because they are designed not to respond to shock wave pressure. Instead, they are calibrated to explode only when stepped on. “The blast radius of ordnance is usually up and out,” said Nelson.

For additional blast

protection, dump trucks can be placed at the rear of the trench next to the excavator. Standoff distance should be at least 50 feet from the excavator on the surface. Personnel in the trench may need to evacuate further, such as 100 feet minimum, and have egress ladders nearby. A contractor safety officer should be on site while digging is ongoing and a proper first aid kit readily available. “Remember at all times,” said Nelson, “we are in a war zone.”

When trenching has proceeded below grade, an

above grade spotter can be used to help the excavator operator locate and identify encountered metal objects, said Nelson. If the spotter needs proper Personal Protective Equipment, such as a blast suit, one can be obtained from the MAC.

When an unknown metal object or possible UXO is encountered, the contractor must immediately stop all construction activities in the area, evacuate personnel in the vicinity, and block access to the area surrounding the possible explosive. Then the Corps of Engineers, the MAC, and the Explosive Ordnance Disposal must be notified so that necessary steps can be taken to clear the area.

With every mine that is lifted, another step is taken in making Afghanistan a safer place. The MAC ensures its mission is done with safety and precision, from contracting to caring, according to a U.S. Central Command article. They work by the motto, “Demining is a dangerous job. Where once you cautiously followed and stepped in my footsteps, you can now have the confidence to lead and make your own.” But until then, Kaehler says, “stay on the tracks!” 🇺🇸

(Editor’s note: This article references the Mine Action Center. They handle demining issues for Bagram Airfield only. For any other demining issues in country, please contact AED’s Safety Officer Dave Stanton at 540-665-3471 or cell +93 (0)79 803 5830.)