

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT AND VENTILATION PROGRAMME FOR CROATIAN ARMY MINE-CLEARING PERSONNEL

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### ABSTRACT

*Once war conflicts are over, military power and equipment are put under the international military supervision. Mines, however, remain, as decades-long humanitarian, economical and psychological threat. The mission of clearing mines, the "heritage" of the 20<sup>th</sup> century makes a critical obligation within human rights protection and peace preservation initiatives.*

*Mines disable or kill 26 000 people worldwide annually, mostly civilians, with children victims accounting for half the figure. According to the data of UN Disarmament Institute in Geneva (UNIDIR), in the 1945 - 1995 period over 400 000 million landmines were laid throughout the world. Croatia is presently among the ten most critical countries in this regard. In the Homeland Defence War almost half of the territory of the Republic of Croatia was the scene of fighting, and over about 13 000 kms<sup>2</sup> as many as 3 million anti-armor and anti-personnel mines were laid, and over million different artillery shells fired. Since the liberation operations in 1995 the lion's share of heaviest amount of mine-clearing task was carried out by Croatian Armed Forces and police specialists using the equipment at disposal and improvised. The job was gradually taken over by civilian organizations. Recent estimates suspect that still some 1 - 1,2 million mines are found in the 4 500 kms<sup>2</sup> area, which, as planned, is not to be cleared completely before the year 2010.*

*Psychological determinants, especially the stressful nature of mine clearing job, demand psychological involvement. In the 1996 Department of Military Psychology of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia authored the Psychological Support and Ventilation Programme. The programme was primarily intended for mine-clearing personnel, but it allows modifications which render it usable with other military specialties. So, a version of the programme is conducted with the Air Force (pilot) population. Initially, the programme contained psychological preparing of mine-clearing personnel for deployment, ventilation and relaxation, processing of traumatical incidents, individual and family counselling, assessment of psychological preparedness of mine-clearing teams as well as the proposal of optimization measures. The program was applied with each group separately, whereas the wives of the teams members were approached collectively. Systematic evaluation of the program's effectiveness and psychological efficiency makes an integral part of the Programme.*

*This poster demonstrates the Programme as applied in 1996 and 1997, incorporated into the active vacation organized for the Armed Forces mine-clearing personnel deployed in the Danubian basin. Also shown are the results of the program efficiency evaluation.*

## 1. Introduction

The truce installed, or conflict terminated, military assets are withdrawn into military installations and placed under control of international military bodies. However, mines and other explosive devices remain in the fields as a long-term threat with humanitarian, economical and psychological repercussions. Therefore, military operations undertaken in the oncoming millenium primarily aimed at preserving peace and protection of human rights will probably include dealing with this hazardous legacy of XX century. Clearing of contaminated surfaces is condition of any (re)construction incentive in the war areas, of farming work, of the economic recovery and of return of the exiled.

Mines toll reaches some 26 000 casualties annually, civilians mostly, with children accounting for half the figure. The data of the United Nations Institute in Geneva (UNIDIR) show that from 1940-1995 over 400 million land mines were laid worldwide that remain as a decades-long threat.

Croatia is presently among the 10 most mine-contaminated countries in the world. During the Homeland Defence War almost half of its territory was caught by the war flame, the mines were laid over some 13 000 kms<sup>2</sup> and over 1 000 000 shells were fired. Since the liberation, the critical job in mine-clearing has been done by Croatian Armed Forces members and special force troops who cleared airports, barracks, industrial facilities and removed and destroyed unexploded devices, investing their skills, improvised equipment and patriotism into the task. Civilian companies now increasingly take over the job. The latest estimates say 1,200 000 mines are still left over the contaminated area of some 4,500 kms<sup>2</sup> that, as estimated, will not be cleared through before 2010.

Mine clearing job is extremely stressful and dangerous. Acute stress that does not resolve but goes on to accumulate over time will lead to chronic stress. Several members of a mine-clearing team displaying symptoms of chronic stress undermine the efficiency of the entire team, which in turn causes additional stress. Acute stress symptoms manifest as an initial state of confusion, restricted attention, misapprehension of external stimuli and disorientation, succeeded by avoiding stressful situations, social withdrawal or exaggerated distress, and, not uncommon, panic anxiety symptoms (increased heart rate, sweating etc.). Working in stressful situations, engineers may in time display accumulated acute stress and even symptoms of chronic stress, manifested primarily in disrupted professional and social functioning. Each deployment and expecting the return is highly stressful for engineers' families too, and can disrupt family life, that in its turn affects psychological operational readiness for the mine-clearing job.

## 2. PSYCHOLOGICAL VENTILATION AND SUPPORT PROGRAM

In 1996, the Department of Military Psychology of the Public Affairs and Information Division of the Croatian Ministry of Defence devised a Programme of Psychological Ventilation and support, which is administered by military psychologists. Although originally intended for Mine-clearing teams, the Programme can be modified to be implemented with other segments of Croatian Armed Forces, particularly special units. Thus, a version of the Program is successfully administered with pilots of the Croatian Air Force.

Prevention and preparation make a critical condition of psychological stability and combat readiness of mine clearing teams. However, implementation of all prevention measures available still does not guarantee total protection from unpredicted stress situations that remain unresolved and lead to chronic stage. Some individuals may experience extremely traumatic situations such as wounding, witnessing to their peers' and friends' death. In such cases debriefing procedure is compulsory.

Along with techniques administered following traumatic situations on the site, mine engineers are also assisted during the organised holiday programmes, which include systematical psychological ventilation and support and building on psychological preparation.

All of that helps enhance togetherness as a vital factor of combat and operational readiness, as engineers work together in a team, spend free time and go on holiday together as a team - the opportunity to exchange their experiences and problems.

### **2.1. Program goals**

- 1) providing systematic psychological support and ventilation for mine clearing teams
- 2) practicing the techniques and methods for better psychological and working functioning and psychological readiness and safety at work
- 3) debriefing - following incidents and other traumatic events
- 4) individual and family counselling - when needed
- 5) filing information on psychological readiness of mine clearing teams and their members
- 6) reports to the respective authority containing assesment of situation and proposed measures of improving psychological status and readiness. By means of a special psychological questionnaire data are collected on psychological condition of each mine team separately, whereby successive information on the situation in two years of Program implementation were obtained.
- 7) systematic evaluation of the Programme effectiveness and psychologists' efficiency makes an integral part of it For that purpose, group leaders presented their own suggestions and observations on the program applied. Effectiveness and satisfaction with the Programme was evaluated anonymously by all groups through a special questionnaire.
- 8) long-term habituation of group leaders and mine engineers to psychological consulting in the mine clearing context

### **2.2 Activities of the Programme**

The Programme contains psychological preparing and support to practice at-hand, practice in stress or traumatic events and the segment conducted during organised holiday.

#### **2.2.1. At-hand activities**

##### **1. PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION FOR MINE CLEARING TASKS**

- on a monthly basis
- training for all members of mine-clearing squads on psychological techniques to be applied while working in minefields
- training for all commanders
- evaluation of situation in mine-clearing teams
- ventilation (when needed)

##### **2. PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES APPLICABLE WHILE MINE-CLEARING**

- parcelling out the minefield (before getting on to mine clearing, each engineer parcels out lanes to clear guided by natural orientation points)
- autosuggestion (engineers take several breaths and apply autosuggestion: "I'm perfectly cool and collected", the procedure is also applied with each orientation point chosen)
- looking back (each time an engineer feels tired and loosing concentration he should stop working, look back on the lane cleared and apply autosuggestion before going on clearing - in order to enhance self-confidence)

##### **3. DEBRIEFING**

- following traumatic or stressful incidents in minefields
- version - modified CISD
- timing - 24-48 hs following a wounding or death accident in a minefield
- administered by trained military psychologist team

### 2.2.2. Activities scheduled concurrently with psychological and physical fitness preparation of mine-clearing teams

This part of psychological preparing and ventilation is included into 7-day active holiday programme organised annually, and conducted by 2 military psychologists per a 7-day shift, who worked supervised.

These activities encompassed the following:

#### 1) BRIEFING WITH CHIEFS OF MINE-CLEARING TEAMS

- winning chiefs' interest for the program
- assessment of teams' needs
- presenting the Programme's objectives

#### 2) MINE CLEARING TEAMS VENTILATION GROUPS

- groups - mine clearing members team members working together
- two 45-min meetings per group

##### Meeting 1:

- \*introduction
- \*trust and confidence
- \*assessment of situation in the teams through observation and questionnaire
- \*ventilation

##### Meeting 2:

- \*informal training on suggested topics
- \*encouraging appropriate stress-coping styles
- \*evaluation of the Programme through a questionnaire
- \*detecting individuals who need additional treatment

##### Suggested topics:

- PTSD and acute stress reactions symptoms
- acute stress reactions symptoms normalisation
- stress and stress-coping styles
- alcohol abuse
- burn-out
- trust and cohesion
- trust in commanders
- concentration problems
- work organisation
- family and social functioning difficulties

#### 3. MINE CLEARING TEAMS RELAXATION GROUPS

- succeed ventilation groups; duration 20 minutes
- ISOMETRIC EXERCISES - **purpose**: relaxation, warming-up, physical fitness
- BREATHING EXERCISES - natural abdominal breathing exercises,
- abdominal breathing and visualisation; intrusive thoughts repelling; **purpose**: relaxation and tension reducing
- BODY AWARENESS EXERCISES -body awareness exercises + exercises for arousing sensations (warm, cold, weight); **purpose**: relaxation, tension reducing
- CREATIVE VISUALISATION - different types of visualisation aimed at getting relaxation, tension reducing, feeling of safety and at boosting up energy
- AUTOSUGGESTION - breathing exercise + autosuggestion of calmness (or other autosuggestion)
- ACUPRESSURE - acupressure scheme of points for facilitating waking-up (to take in the morning) and vigilance (to be applied in the while working)

#### 4. VENTILATION GROUPS FOR ENGINEERS' WIVES

- family stability and support - vital
- 2x 45-min sessions
- secondary traumatisation assessment
- non-formal training on stress, stress-coping styles (getting through husband's absence from home), changes in the family (switched roles)

- highlighting the importance of family support
- improving communication within the family

#### 5. RELAXATION GROUPS FOR ENGINEERS' WIVES

- 2x20-min sessions
- breathing exercises
- creative visualisation

#### 6. INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY COUNSELLING

- based on consultation and support techniques
- participation - optional
- major psychological disturbances cases reported to the unit psychologist

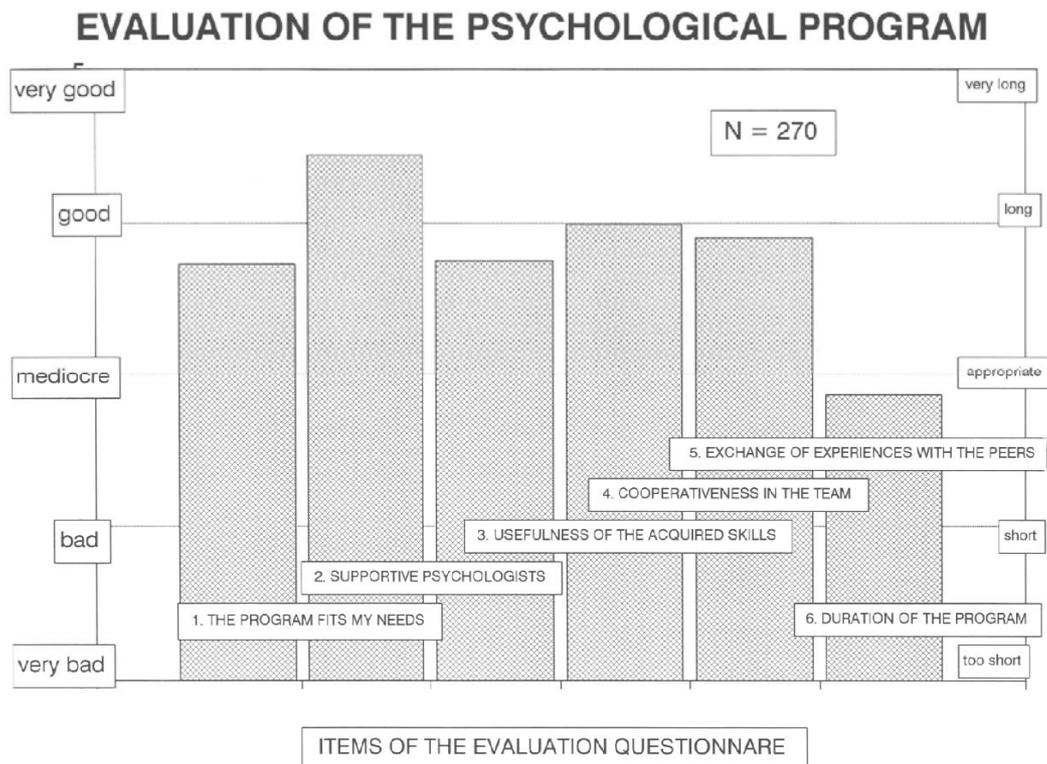
#### 7. CLOSING MEETING WITH CHIEFS OF MINE CLEARING TEAMS

- evaluation of the Programme
- team chief's suggestion for improving the Programme

### 2.3. Programme evaluation

Evaluation of the Programme's effectiveness is conducted by means of evaluation questionnaires, psychologists' as well as supervisors' notes. Evaluation results were used as guidelines for further development of the Programme.

**Figure 1: The effects of the Programme**



### 2.4. Debriefing for Programme conductors

As the Programme's application showed to be a very stressful and exhausting task for military psychologists, who were working in shifts, burnout prevention meetings were also conducted, scheduled following each shift and upon completion of the Programme.

### **2. 5. Reports on the situation in mine-clearing teams**

Following each holiday program a report on the situation in mine-clearing teams was sent to the Mine-clearing Command.

The reports covered:

- evaluation of the observed stress-coping styles, trauma and burnout extent
- evaluation of field work organisation
- suggestions for improving the situation in the teams

### **2.6. Programme application material**

The Department of Military Psychology composed a questionnaire on stressfulness of the job, on burnout symptoms level, evaluation questionnaire, and the Manual of assistance to mine clearing personnel to instruct military psychologists on implementation of the Programme. A flyer was composed for the engineers and for their families too, containing information on stress, stress-coping strategies, burnout and coping strategies, relaxation techniques.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

Psychological determinants, and especially the stressful nature of mine clearing job itself, call for psychologist engagement in nearly all segments. Psychological selection and classification, psychological preparation and training of mine engineers, as well as advice for as rational and safe organisation as possible have largely contributed to reducing the impact of the stressful job and to enhancing safety of engineers lives and thus provide a significant support to them even in hard environments.

Quality psychological preparation and prevention of incidents makes a highly important condition of psychological stability and readiness of mine clearing teams. Prevention should include instruction of mine engineers on stress, stressors, symptoms of stress, burnout syndrome as well as on stress-coping strategies and techniques. Tailored relaxation techniques, oculomotor and psychomotor coordination exercises, attention sustaining techniques are expected to help improve concentration and readiness and safety in the mine clearing job. Discussion of real problem situations and suggestions for a better working organisation and interpersonal relationships is another useful step.

Motivation, efficiency and safety in the job are tightly associated with the trust in team chief and the cohesion level.