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# US specialist team in PNG to remove WWII ordinance

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Some of the largest battles that raged in the Pacific during World War Two happened around Papua New Guinea's Bougainville, where allied forces fought desperately to repel the Japanese from taking the top-end of Australia. More than 60 years later, thousands of unexploded weapons, ammunition, and explosives litter Bougainville, limiting locals' ability to pursue even basic subsistence farming due to the dangers. Abandoned World War Two ordinance has also been scavenged from Bougainville and used by militant groups and criminals over the years.

So in response to a request from the government of Papua New Guinea in January this year, the US State Department's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement is assessing how to remove these weapons. Their Quick Reaction Force has now deployed to Torokina District, on Bougainville.

*Presenter: Geraldine Coutts*

*Speaker: Charles A Stonecipher, Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement with the US Department of State*

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STONECIPHER: This office in the state department funds humanitarian demining and unexploded ordinance clearance in a couple of score countries around the world. One of the ways that we do it is by dispatching this Quick Reaction Force, which is composed of civilian explosive ordinance experts on contracts to the state department to be used for quick purposes. They are not for prolonged projects, like long time mine clearance say in South East Asia. But for quick projects they are perfect and they are the ones that we have sent in to take a survey of Torokina.

COUTTS: Okay, so what has the survey shown you?

STONECIPHER: So far we know is that when US and Australian forces left the area in 1945, finally at the end of the war, there was a clean up conducted but that a lot of ordinance was left behind - a lot of stuff that had been fired and had failed to explode, but also a lot of ammunition that was simply left by old motor pits and artillery positions. And this ammunition, including lots of small arms ammunition litters the area and it has been limiting the ability of the farmers to farm and to plant their cocoa trees to harvest and it's been causing civilian casualties. The team that is there now has been mapping the locations of the bigger accumulations of this material and they have also been interviewing the locals to find out where they consider the areas to be highest priority for a future clearance activities.

COUTTS: Now can you just give us an idea of how much we're talking about, I mean is it dozen? A hundred?

STONECIPHER: We're talking probably at least 100 different sites that might have anywhere from 20 to 100 mortar rounds for example. These are all over the place. The areas are very heavily forested largely, so it is hard to reach these places. I made a trip there in June myself as part of a very initial couple day look around and just in that period of time, fanning out through the woods and being shown by the villages where things were. I myself saw probably 20 or 30 significant piles of World War Two ammunition.

COUTTS: Piles?

STONECIPHER: Piles.

COUTTS: Now, because they have been there for such a long time, it's not going to be an easy task. You would expect that the firing mechanisms and stuff is a bit dodgy now, so it is going to be hard to dismantle?

STONECHIPER: Yeah, we would typically not even try to dismantle them. Most of them would be detonated, EOD technicians, Explosive Ordinance Disposal technicians would go in, set charges, make sure that everyone was clear of the area and simply blow the stuff up, because you are exactly right. It is way to dodgy to try to take these things apart.

COUTTS: And so what kind of terrain is this in? You would expect being Bougainville, that it is not going to be easy work?

STONECHIPER: As it happens, the area that the US and Australian forces operated out of Torokina is a large fairly flat basin. It is surrounded by very rough terrain and the Australian forces fought back through that very rough terrain. But the main area that we are concentrating on is fairly flat and it is where there were three allied air fields built during the war. Like I say, it's heavily timbered now and largely overgrown, but it's not as rugged as it is a little bit farther inland.

COUTTS: So, obviously because of the airports they were munition dumps nearby, so are you expecting this is the only area Torokina. There are not other areas that might have similar amounts of munitions dumped there?

STONECHIPER: This will be far and away the largest area on Bougainville. This was the largest allied base, Torokina was, and it is also the site of the largest land battles with the Japanese forces. Farther inland, there will indeed be other areas and there would certainly be some an expectation that you would find, for example, Japanese ammo dumps in other parts of the island, but this will certainly be by far the largest concentration.