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Text@ A combat engineer's job is a slow moving one at times.

When it comes to clearing mine fields, like the many that litter the area surrounding Bagram Air Field, careful precision must be taken with each action. If an engineer makes a mistake when clearing mines, it could cost his life, or another soldier's life.

For this reason every piece of metal that alerts a mine detector must be marked and probed to make sure there is no hazard, explained Capt. Mike Baker, the commander of C Company, 27th Engineer Battalion. This is also what makes the new Handheld Standoff Mine Detector System so important.

The system is the newest mine detector to be used by the Army and is being used for the first time in a combat situation by paratroopers of C Co. at Bagram.

HSTAMIDS uses the standard practice of metal detection for finding mines, but also has ground penetrating radar to help reduce false identification of land mines.

This is especially important in an area like Bagram, said Baker. Bagram's soil is littered with pieces of scrap metal that conventional mine detectors often detect as low metal antipersonnel mines. The detector uses a combination of metal detection and density measuring radar to determine if a mine may be present.

“You can cancel out the metal pieces that you used to have to probe for that weren’t really mines at all,” said Spc, Mercellus O. Fields, a combat engineer with C Co.

Fields and other combat engineers were required to complete 40 hours of classes to learn how to use the HSTAMIDS. Troopers then qualified with the detector by finding all the training mines placed in a lane to be cleared. After the course is completed the engineers can still be seen practicing their skills just outside their living quarters in Viper City.

“I feel confident with (the HSTAMIDS), it was easy to learn, and simple to use,” Fields said.

Its new technology of using radar and metal detection has made it one of the first true mine detectors used. Previous detectors did little more than alert an operator when there was metal content in the ground.

“The radar lets us see density changes in the ground, and that is the difference between finding pieces of scrap metal, or an actual mine,” said Spc. Gwinn Alva a combat engineer of C Co.

“Overall it is a more efficient system because you will not have to probe for every small piece of metal that you come across,” said Alva.

This efficiency will help speed up the process of clearing lanes in a minefield. Some of the engineers estimated that with the HSTAMIDS they will be able to clear in one day what would have taken a week in the past.

Afghanistan is one of the world's most heavily mined countries, and Bagram, a former Soviet air field is one of the worst areas, according to the engineers. The task of clearing mines is always ongoing for C. Co., and that is why the HSTAMIDS is such a welcomed tool for its effectiveness and speed.

“The HSTAMIDS is more reliable than any other mine detection system we have used,” said Alva. “Overall it is the most efficient mine detector we have.”



Pvt. Jeff Salem, a combat engineer of C Company, 27th Engineer Battalion, hones his skills on the Handheld Standoff Mine Detector System at Bagram Air Field. The 27th Engineer Bn. is the first unit to use the new HSTAMIDS in a combat role. (Photo by PFC Meseke, CTF82 PAO)