

Landmine clearance legacy that Diana left

Visitors to next week's Royal Welsh Show at Llanelwedd will have the chance to swing a landmine detector and try out the famous blue body armour made famous by Diana, Princess of Wales. Rachel Brock, from landmine clearance charity The HALO Trust, has been telling Amanda Powell how she has searched for active devices in former war zones, and how women are becoming more involved

WHEN I first cleared landmines, I was absolutely petrified," says mines clearance expert Rachel Brock. She'll be at the Royal Welsh Show from Monday to Wednesday next week, on her first visit to Wales and the first time the charity she works for, The HALO Trust, has brought along its dummy minefield, complete with skull-and-bones mine signs and explosive-free landmines. The blue body armour and protective visor, which show visitors will also be able to try out, was made famous when Princess Diana walked through one of HALO's minefields in Angola in 1997.

Prince Harry has carried on his late mother's work on the landmine issue, visiting minefields in Angola and Mozambique. Rachel works in a support role for HALO, and learned to clear live landmines as part of her training.

"It was very, very scary," she says, recounting the first time she approached a landmine along a densely-laid belt of devices in Cambodia.

"I was inching and scraping towards it, knowing it was there, and very, very happy once I found it, that that was it, it was revealed and I could move on. Once I'd done that first one, I felt a lot more confident. You gain confidence as you go on."

The charity was founded in Afghanistan in 1988 and now removes mines and devices in 27 countries and states around the world with a mission to protect lives and restore livelihoods for those affected by conflict.

The passion in Rachel's voice is evident as she tells me about what HALO does, especially as her job means she meets people who've been maimed by the explosive debris of war.

"When I started with HALO I was 23," she says. "After Cambodia, I had my daughter and now I'm a parent, it hits home a lot more."

"When you're in these communities, this is their reality and it's something I don't have to worry about as a parent."

"I never have to worry about her running

around playing and there being minefields nearby, and it puts it a lot more into perspective." She speaks to people who've been left disabled by landmines, many of them caught in an explosion when they were children.

"They've grown up with amputations or injuries from landmines, and their resilience is phenomenal, their ability to get on with it and continue on with their lives is very inspiring. "It just makes you want you to do more and help more people, so they don't have to go through it," she says.

The HALO Trust was founded as a response to the global humanitarian catastrophe caused by landmines.

The problem was particularly acute in Afghanistan where thousands of civilians were being killed or injured by landmines and their presence was preventing the return of tens of thousands of refugees.

Former British soldiers who had first hand experience of the devastation there resolved to do something about it and founded the trust, with current statistics demonstrating how vital the work is.

Around the world, some 8,000 people are killed and injured by landmines and other explosive debris every year and 78% of the casualties are civilians.

Rachel talks me through the process of clearing landmines, something she'll be demonstrating to those who pay a visit to the UK Government marquee at the Royal Welsh Show.

"When we go to an area, we do an extensive survey, where the conflict was, who was fighting which side, if there was an area they wanted to defend. You get an idea almost militarily of where the minefield would be."

"Often, in a lot of the places we work, there aren't maps of where the landmines are. Then you have to speak to local communities about where the accidents are."

The farmers and people from rural communities who come along to the Royal Welsh Show will appreciate what Rachel says next, as she explains



> Princess Diana walks next to the edge of a minefield in Angola



> HALO's Rachel Brock demonstrates mine clearance



> Prince Harry visited a HALO minefield in Angola in 2013



> HALO staff in Fallujah in Iraq clearing IEDs using armoured equipment

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the accidents they hear about in conflict zones don't just involve people.

"Often we find out from cattle accidents," she says. "Cows and sheep will obviously just wander in. Losing livestock in Zimbabwe is a particular problem, that's losing \$100 to \$1,000 for a family who desperately need it for survival, so livestock accidents are huge problem for a lot of these rural communities."

"So, we get a good understanding of where these accidents are happening and where they are in proximity to where people are living, then we map and mark them with 'danger - mine' signs."

They then liaise extensively with local communities explaining the dangers and what the signs mean, to local people, especially children.

Once all of that is done, a typical eight-person team of deminers will move in, often with metal detectors.

"We use metal detectors because landmines have an element of metal in them and that's what we're trying to find," she says.

"We sweep the ground and we have a process of 'one man one risk', so you make sure there's a safe distance between the deminers."

"In the unlikely event of an accident, that means it's not a whole team around them that would be affected."

"When we find a metal signal, we come back a safe distance and go down and towards it, approaching it from the side because how you're going to set off a landmine is by hitting the pressure plate on the top."

"It's safe to come at it from the side so you're not approaching the mechanism that will set it off."

Once it's identified as a landmine, it's then destroyed by explosive in the position where it's found.

"We take a block of TNT, put it beside the landmine, move everyone out a safe distance, it's blown up and once it's gone, it's gone forever, it's not going to harm anyone again."

Then the team repeats the hard, physical work of finding the next mine.

Landmine clearance is inherently dangerous. In the last 10 years 18 deminers, all local HALO staff, have been killed in accidents while clearing landmines and another 45 have been seriously injured.

"We take every landmine accident incredibly

“To put that figure into context, during the same period we cleared around 600,000 landmines and employed on average 7,400 people”

seriously and investigate thoroughly to see how we need to adapt our procedures," says Paul McCann, spokesman for the charity.

"To put that figure into context, during the same period we cleared around 600,000 landmines and employed on average 7,400 people," he adds.

Next week's demonstrations in Powys are aimed at showing how they've made the work as safe as possible, training and employing local people to carry it out.

The task work worldwide is still male-dominated and HALO is especially keen to take on female deminers, reaching 50% female staff levels in places like Sri Lanka and Cambodia and Laos.

In Angola HALO has all-female mine clearance teams and Rachel explains how that allows women to learn new skills and support their families in a place where there are few steady jobs for rural women and there are still villages which are very close to minefields.

"When I first joined HALO in 2006, I was the second female international staff member on the ground, now the number of females has grown," says Rachel.

"They have no problem managing to recruit women, mainly from mine-affected communities in Angola," she adds.

"A lot of them are single parents, working out in the minefield for 20 to 25 days a month and then coming back to see their kids."

"It's providing jobs where there are none, and for women, in a lot of the places we work around the world, that's so important, because a lot of the time, women either have no job opportunities, or, if they do have a job opportunity, they're likely to get paid less than men."

"Throughout all of our programmes, men and women are paid the same."

"What a lot of these women have done, they're able to show that women are able to take on these positions and it's not different to a man in terms of capability."

"In a lot of these communities, they're showing women can be leaders, they can be inspirational and they can still be mums and look after the family."

■ HALO's dummy mine lane will be part of the UK Government marquee at the Royal Welsh Show from Monday, July 22, to Wednesday, July 24.