

WORLD WITHOUT MINES

NEWSLETTER

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INTERVIEW: KATRIN STAUFFER, MINE CLEARER



From advertising agency to minefield: At just under thirty, Katrin Stauffer turned her life upside down and became a mine clearer.

„Just helping doesn't help.“

Katrin Stauffer, 36, is an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist, according to her official job title in the Swiss Armed Forces. Her assignments take her to countries like Lao PDR, Kosovo and the Congo. The former advertiser is also studying Risk, Crisis & Disaster Management at the University of Leicester: She is keen to learn more about resolving conflicts. Interview: Christian Schmidt

Men lay mines, you as a woman remove them. Does this highlight the divide between the sexes?

No. I am an exception in this profession. Mine clearing is primarily a male domain, not least because the work is physically demanding. Women are mostly only involved in peripheral activities, in victim support and administration.

When you are out in the field, do you think about the soldiers who laid these mines, knowing that they might kill civilians?

War is over by the time I arrive there. I see the mines as remnants of the conflict, as the legacy of former tactical considerations. So, I don't think much about the soldiers who planted these weapons. I also don't see mines as the most insidious of all instruments of war; their removal must not be the sole focus of all our attention. In former war zones, mines are usually only one of quite a number of problems. Personally, I am just as concerned by the behaviour towards children or women here. By how many people are starving. By how many people are beaten to death in



Humanitarian mine clearing: Katrin Stauffer headed up the UN demining programme in the Congo.

the street. Compared to these things, mines are a solvable problem.

So, you don't see mine clearing as an idealistic deed?

Obviously there is an element of idealism to it. But just helping doesn't help. In demining terms, this means: Clearing a piece of land is just the start. I also need to make sure that the land is used again afterwards. That farmers plant crops again. If I don't do that, then the people remain victims and we have demined for nothing. That cannot be the aim of the exercise.

What is your main role in the field?

I am mainly involved in monitoring and quality control. What this means is that, once an area has been cleared, I use a hand-held detector to check whether the work has been done to the standards required. I also train the local teams. The actual fieldwork, in other words scouring the ground millimetre by millimetre, is usually done by local colleagues. For them, mine clearing represents a welcome income.

How often do you find yourself in danger?

Rarely. As long as I abide by the rules, I don't put myself in danger. Mine clearing has a lot to do with discipline and attention. It only becomes dangerous when locals bring a bag with munitions that they have found themselves. Hand grenades, cluster bombs and so on – these are sensitive to the slightest touch and can go off at any time. Then I have to make it absolutely clear to them quickly that they should put the bag down extremely slowly.

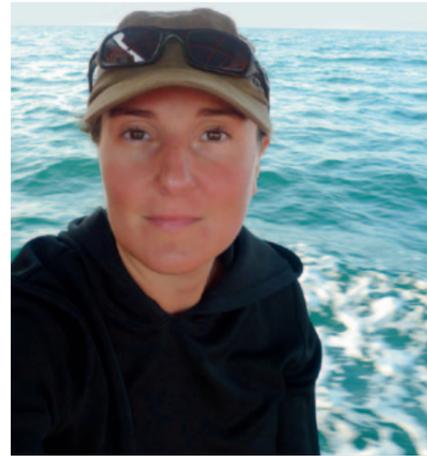
Before you became an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist, you worked in advertising. These are two very different worlds.

I'd had enough of making ads for lawn mowers; I felt it wasn't challenging me enough. One day, I was watching a television programme about explosive ordnance disposal. That made up my mind. Conflicts interest me. What triggers them? Who fights against whom, and why? I also have a technical flair. I saw mine clearing as a direct path into former war zones and a way of finding answers to my questions. So, I started on the appropriate training.

What are you currently doing?

I should actually be in Kosovo. Switzerland is supporting the KFOR there with a small explosive ordnance disposal team. But because of an injury that I picked up during military training I am now sitting in an office in Thun. I spend some of the time on stand-by at the national Unexploded Ordnance Centre and the rest working on upgrading our munitions database.

As soon as I am fit for action, I will be going abroad again – to the Congo. Then I'll be able to do what I love doing most: Destroying munitions during the day and thinking about securing peace in the evening.



Katrin Stauffer is the only woman in Switzerland employed to work as a mine clearer.

Personal profile: Shortly before her thirtieth birthday, Katrin Stauffer enlisted and entered the Recruit School, before going on to train as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist at the EOD Centre of Competence of the Swiss Armed Forces.

Role of the Swiss Armed Forces: EOD experts like Katrin Stauffer are deployed internationally on humanitarian mine clearing missions. As supervisors or technical consultants, they perform varied tasks in the training of local deminers, check compliance with international mine clearing standards and plan measures for areas contaminated with mines.



Building a new school – after 55 bomblets and other munitions were made safe on the site.

What happens when the deminers have finished their work?

Since 2008, World Without Mines has been involved in Lao PDR, a country heavily contaminated with explosive remnants of war. Our goal: to quickly clear those areas that would be most beneficial to the population.

With the support of World Without Mines, every year an area spanning some three million square metres in Khammouane Province can be demined and cleared of cluster munitions. This sounds like a lot, but it is not nearly enough to open up all the danger zones to the local people in the foreseeable future. For this reason, priority is being given to clearance projects that will further the country's development and fight poverty.

Progress for the village of Na Peng.

The inhabitants of Na Peng are looking forward to the upcoming official opening of the new secondary school. Until now, pupils had to travel eight kilometres to the nearest school. The travel, food and accommodation costs were too high for most families, so their children's education was often aborted after primary school.

Before work began on the new building, the site spanning 3.1 hectares was cleared of cluster munitions. It is highly likely that there are also numerous bomblets concealed in the surrounding area. So, the schoolchildren have also been trained

by our local partner in how to deal correctly with the danger posed by remnants of war.

Better livelihood for farming families.

A farmer from the same village asked for his rice field to be cleared. He had come across several munitions while working in the field. Needing to feed his family, he had had no choice but to risk injury.

During a three-day clearance operation in June 2013, the field was completely eradicated of explosive ordnances, and by the time we visited the project in October the rice was in full bloom again!



Cultivating a rice field again – after it was cleared of 15 projectiles.



Building a hospital – after the site was cleared of three grenades.



World Without Mines would not exist without them:
Monique and Claudine Bolay

**„Everyone spoke about mines,
but hardly anyone did anything.“**

**How does anyone come to found a demining organisation?
We spoke to the two founders of World Without Mines
about their commitment.**

Anyone who opened a newspaper or switched on the television in January 1997 saw images that made history: Lady Diana in Angola. The princess visited mine victims and sparked a media frenzy when she walked through a mine field wearing protective equipment. This brought the issue of land mines to the attention of the general public, and many people were moved by it.

Among those who took an interest was Claudine Bolay. „At first, I just wanted to find out which organisations were dealing with the mine problem,“ she says. „I discovered that support for mine victims existed or at least had been initiated. But hardly anyone was doing anything about actually clearing the mines.“

Claudine Bolay spoke to her sister Monique, and the two of them set to work. They contacted experts in the field of humanitarian mine clearing and forged relationships with for-

mer professional military personnel involved in demining. Claudine and Monique Bolay, a psychotherapist and ethnologist, respectively, delved into a subject that was completely new to them.

**Start-up support from their
circle of friends.**

The vision was clear: a world without mines. Claudine and Monique began asking friends for donations, and also made a contribution themselves, in order to raise the required start-up capital of 50,000 Swiss francs. The foundation was then set up, and its first project was launched in Mozambique.

**An area equivalent to some
800 football pitches demined.**

In its 16 years, World Without Mines has put together a considerable demining programme and has helped enable the populations of several countries to live in safety again. Claudine and Monique have played an instrumental role in this success since, as President of the Board (Claudine Bolay) and Head of Projects (Monique Bolay), they continue to shape the foundation to this day. Every week, they both invest around one working day in the continued expansion of World Without Mines – a truly exceptional commitment!

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WORLD WITHOUT MINES Foundation
Badenerstrasse 16, 8004 Zurich
Telephone +41 44 241 72 30
info@wom.ch, www.wom.ch
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