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Unsung Hero: Howard "Jim" Yoder

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Since getting involved in mine action six years ago, Jim Yoder has contributed his dedication and long hours in the field to help reap humanitarian benefits for many people in Thailand, Cambodia and now the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Yoder is an inspiration to his peers and the many others he has reached through his work.

Howard “Jim” Yoder knew nothing about demining when he got his first assignment in August 2001. Five years later, at a VIP Day ceremony for the recent handover of demined and cleared land in Thailand attended by the program manager of the U.S. Department of Defense Humanitarian Demining R&D Program, U.S. embassy representatives, Japanese ambassadors, the Italian ambassador, provincial governors, the Royal Thai Army Deputy Supreme Commander, Thai senators, heads of nongovernmental organizations and other dignitaries, Yoder’s name was mentioned more than once in speeches, each time acknowledging his vital role with the Thailand Mine Action Centre and his dedication to his demining commitments. In the eyes of more people than he probably knows, Jim Yoder is a very deserving unsung hero.

In 2001, a vegetation-machine manufacturer in Cambodia hired Yoder and later sent him to Thailand to maintain their machines. He has never left, and has now worked for S-3 Services—which has a contract with the Department of Defense Humanitarian Demining R&D Program—for the past three years. Yoder has devised his life to removing landmines in Thailand and returning the land to farmers.

“Jim is truly one of a kind. He is one of the most dedicated individuals I have ever met,” says Ron Smith, owner and director of S-3 Services. “Jim not only cares about getting his work done, he takes it upon himself to provide the deminers with motivation,” says Smith. “Jim is a real morale booster, and he takes care of the local Thai and Cambodian people involved in demining.”

According to Smith, most of the work that has been done (land cleared and returned to farmers) would not have been completed without Yoder. He is one of the most knowledgeable people in the world with regard to the Tempest (a fuel vegetation and ground-engagement machine), and one of the most experienced and knowledgeable people in the Lii Disk, Plan Cutter system. He understands the concepts of manual and mechanical demining “since the machines are in the R&D [research and development] stages, Jim’s comments and constructive observations often lead to improvements in the systems,” says Smith, “which result in savings of time and money, and therefore, limbs, lives and land.”

For Yoder, the most important thing is that landmines are being removed from Thailand and the land is being returned to the people for farming. “We are making areas easier, faster and safer for manual demining to be completed by using the machines ahead of them,” says Yoder. “Though it is a dangerous job, Yoder truly appreciates the great reputation he gets from the staff of Night Vision Labs & Electronic Sensors Directorate, the TMAC staff and the Lii Cutter equipment operators. He says it is quite rewarding when “the local villagers stop you and thank you for making it possible for their land to be demined and handed back to them for farming and [making] a living.”

Yet Yoder does not feel like a hero. As he put it, “I am just a man that has always put hard work and tried to do what I am asked to do.” To Yoder, the real heroes are the three TMAC machine operators (Boonstraum, UK and Wat) who have been with him from the start of this job. “They are the ones who have to operate this expensive equipment everyday inside a prolonged mine area and do it without any types,” says Yoder. “The TMAC equipment operators are my heroes and they need a lot more credit for what we have done here along with Night Vision Labs and TMAC, without whose support we could not have completed what we have to date.”