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**Photographing Tragedy: Landmines and Victims**

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*photographer*

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research, the overall success of mine action hinges on community support and cooperation. Mine action is a humanitarian and life-preserving effort, but if demining projects infringe on a resource valued by the community, support for demining will be diminished instead of increased. The public voice plays a crucial role in government decisions and regulations. If deminers seek a balance between public opinion and mine clearance activities, the resulting positive publicity can only benefit the global mine action community.

The significant role of public opinion was demonstrated by an incident in Sonsonata Bay, Rota. As part of the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Rota currently flourishes from the diving industry. Tourists and divers form a substantial economic force that the island depends on for profit. Divers swim around sunken ships that have nearly been enveloped by coral, but uncleared depth charges are still partially visible. The ships and depth charges are remnants from World War II, when two Japanese submarine chasers anchored in the bay. Allied forces flying over the bay dropped leftover bombs on the Japanese ships before they landed at Tinian. These wooden Japanese ships were uncleared when they sank, and as submarine chasers they contained the depth charges, which Murray describes as similar in appearance to a 50-gallon drum.

The government of Rota sent a removal request to the Navy EOD unit, fearing the depth charges presented a risk for the local diving community. The Navy EOD team that arrived to survey the depth charges also observed a few bombs in the sunken ships. They were authorized by Rota to return and blow up the bombs. The Navy returned with 25 team members; they destroyed the bombs but also devastated the coral bed and killed a rare hawksbill turtle. The resulting public furor was immense; the diving community was outraged and protested the return of the Navy EOD team. Unfortunately, six depth charges remained on the ships.

Murray contacted the governor of the CNMI and, after providing his qualifications, informed him that if the ships were uncleared and at anchor when they were bombed there would be no fuses. Murray relies on historical and military research and experience. He knew that uncleared ships at anchor never store fuses with ordinance. After diving and confirming the absence of fuses, the Bombs Away diving team cleared the depth charges out of the reef using rebar with a filled edge. The six bombs were then rolled onto a tuna net and hauled to the surface for disposal.

Interestingly, the Sonsonata Bay project received a great deal of notoriety not for the actual demining effort, but for the methods used to extract the depth charges and preserve the underwater environment. Environmental supporters and the diving community lashed the Rota government for revising its clearance efforts. By cooperating with the community and endorsing a mine clearance method that maintained the natural tourist attraction, the government succeeded in alleviating a known risk while promoting environmentally-friendly demining. Local newspapers and journalists further publicized the project and the cooperative demining effort raised public UXO awareness in a positive way.

Mine Action for the Pacific Rim

The lack of government regulations and widespread concern for mine contamination in the Pacific Rim leaves a problem without a clear solution. The islands and Chamorro people are left with a World War II legacy that is dissolving slowly, for although mine action is offered as a response to injuries and unprofessional discoveries, little initiative is taken to locate and clear most of the islands.

Without efficient UXO removal, Murray’s pointed question remains, “How do you think most of these mines are found?” Hundreds of injured or surviving civilians attest to the risk these islands face every day. To change the answer to this question, mine action in the Pacific Rim must be proactive, thorough and cooperative. Active collaboration between the government and demining organizations could promote effective long-term mine clearance. By consolidating effort and resources, they could accelerate the process of eradicating the remnants from a history of unexploded ordinances.

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By Tim Grant, Landmine Photographe

Landmines are insidious devices. A landmine can be any munition placed under, on or near the ground or other surface area that is designed to be detonated or exploded by the presence, proximity or contact of a person or vehicle. Their main purpose is to inflict severe injury on the “enemy” so as to hinder advance and undermine the morale. Only a few mines are designed to kill outright. For every combatant injured it takes another two soldiers to carry them, effectively taking up to three fighters out of the battle.

My initial experiences with landmines came as an employee of the Land Mine Awareness Programme (LMAP) that started in 1999 on the Thai/Cambodian border. After testing the education materials we had produced, it was found that: the people wanted to see photographs of real mines and of landmine victims. The mines reproduced in the photographs were always shown as close as possible to their actual site. After several years of working in mine awareness, we found that photographs were very popular, generating much more interest than illustrations because people can relate more to them, especially when the images are taken in areas familiar to them.

Photographing my first mine was an experience I shall always remember. At that time, it was illegal for foreigners
Photographing the Victims

Photographs make the plight of mine victims more meaningful to viewers and starkly reveal the horror associated with mine injuries. As the program’s media coordinator, it was my job to capture these images.

The first time I photographed a landmine victim is still very vivid in my mind. It was in the Site II refugee camp on the Thai/Cambodian border in 1986. I was being shown the different programs that were operated by one of the local NGOs. We came to the Disabled Skills Training Center, which was run by a Jesuit priest. A pho opportunity quickly appeared in front of me as I entered the facility: a wheelchair bound, double leg amputee with his baby sitting on his lap. I was initially reticent about taking this photograph. However, the center’s resident priest realized my dilemma and assured me it was OK, so I went ahead. As I snapped the shot, the man smiled and told me he was honored that I had chosen he and his child to be photographed—the first of many surprises.

To facilitate the production of teaching materials I made many excursions to the camp hospitals and rehabilitation centers to take photos. The power of these experiences in dirt-floor, bamboo walled rehabilitation centers and cold concrete floored operating rooms was overwhelming. Most of the victims were young men in their late teens or early 20s. Despite their suffering and immense amputation, most were quick with a smile and a joke. This made being there and taking photos a mixture of pleasure and pain. Here in the hospital, surrounded by fellow victims, they started to come to terms with their dramatic change of lifestyle. I worried about what would happen when they returned to their villages, where they would be without free medicine, adequate medical attention and, more importantly, the moral support of their new friends.

Upon arrival at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in-patient section one day, two new victims from Cambodia drew my interest. One of them was a woman who had had her right leg blown off—fortunatly below the knee. She was very frightened as it was all so new to her—sealed rooms with concrete floors, white-skinned people with dangling objects around their necks, plastic covered furniture, and, above all, life with only one and a half legs.

The other victim was a man having an old wound checked. He seemed flattered to have foreign nurse attend to him and show an interest in his recently sown stump, which now looked like the flatted edge of a piece of tissue.

Soon, a busy doctor came in and thoughtlessly tagged on a piece of gauze that was deeply embedded in the wound. The man jumped, then smiled and made a joke with the nurse: “How can be still find humor in this madness?” I asked myself. He was like a brave young boy with a grace knee who didn’t want to his friends his pain. She was like a terrified little girl waiting her turn for an injection, twiching and wringing the sassing she clasped tightly in her hands. I was so distracted by their dilemmas that I didn’t take any photographs.

After awhile, I started to enjoy my visits to the hospital, as I received such a great welcome from the patients, who really appreciated a foreign taking such an interest in their welfare. It was hard at times to remain impartial and I had to “turn-off” many times to enable myself to cope with the tragedies before me. The victims were generally so young and now their lives could possibly be comprehended at that time.

I had received permission from ICRC to photograph mine victims in Khan I-Dong Hospital, so I made my way there, most days equipped with my photographic gear. The head nurse knew me well and would greet me. One day, I arrived at the hospital and was instantly taken by the arm and hustled into the theatre, not knowing what to expect. A mask and hairnet were thrust into my hands as I was pushed through the doorway. A 17-year-old boy had been wounded when a landmine exploded nearby. They already had his stomach laid out on the operating table, expertly searching for shrapnel pieces. This was the first time I had witnessed an operation, and I wondered how I would handle it. I trained my camera onto the surgical scene. Here in front of me was this kid with his insides spilled out, and all I could feel was fascination as I viewed, through a lens, the skilled hands of the surgeon as he probing his way into the open cavity.

The surgeon eventually located a tiny piece of metal, smaller than a 5-cent piece. I glanced at the cut, which started at the top of his chest and finished just above his navel, then to this tiny intruder and pondered the inhumanity of it. They roughly threw his guts back in and stitched the wound. “We will just close this up and do a routine check of his leg, then he should be okay,” the doctor informed me.

Following the surgery, I was starting to feel that I must be fairly brave. But in spite of this sentiment, when they sentiment, when they brought in the next victim I began to think I had chosen the wrong vocation. The second surgery was not as easy to handle. This man’s wounds were older and had become infected. The surgeon had to cut off more of his stump and dress the wound. I took a few images and decided that this time I couldn’t stay any longer.

Several days after the surgery, I returned to the hospital to follow up with the photo stories of both victims. I found the older man, his wife dutifully fingering his body as he slept. She was lost in her thoughts and hardly noticed my presence. The nurse informed me that the 17-year-old, Phou Phea, was in bed no. 45. I couldn’t believe what I saw as I approached. He had only one leg! A feeling of shock hit me. When I had left him in the surgery there was no indication that an amputation was necessary. He was, after all, only hit by two small pieces of shrapnel. I called the nurse over and asked the reason for the amputation. I was told that apart from the chest injury, the second piece had severed a main leg artery. As I drove back to town I saw groups of indifferent youths, about the same age as Phea, enjoying a football match—or I didn’t seem to rat allaticon the victims.

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How to Help...

Those interested can help the plight of land mine victims by generating publicity. This can be achieved by writing a story for a magazine, sending a letter to the editor of a newspaper, or writing an opinion/editorial piece for your local newspaper to express your concern.

One could also make a website, organize an event/exhibition, design a poster, go on the radio, raise funds or appear on television programs to discuss the landmine issue.

Supporters are also welcome to visit our website (www.pitt.net/ timcil) and use the photographs for advocacy purposes.

-Tim Grant