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The Mine Action Visitor Center in Vietnam

by Nguyen Thanh Phu and Chuck Searcy [Project RENEW]

To raise public awareness of the dangers of explosive remnants of war and current mine action activities, Project RENEW created the Mine Action Visitor Center in Quang Tri province, a former demilitarized zone during the Vietnam War.

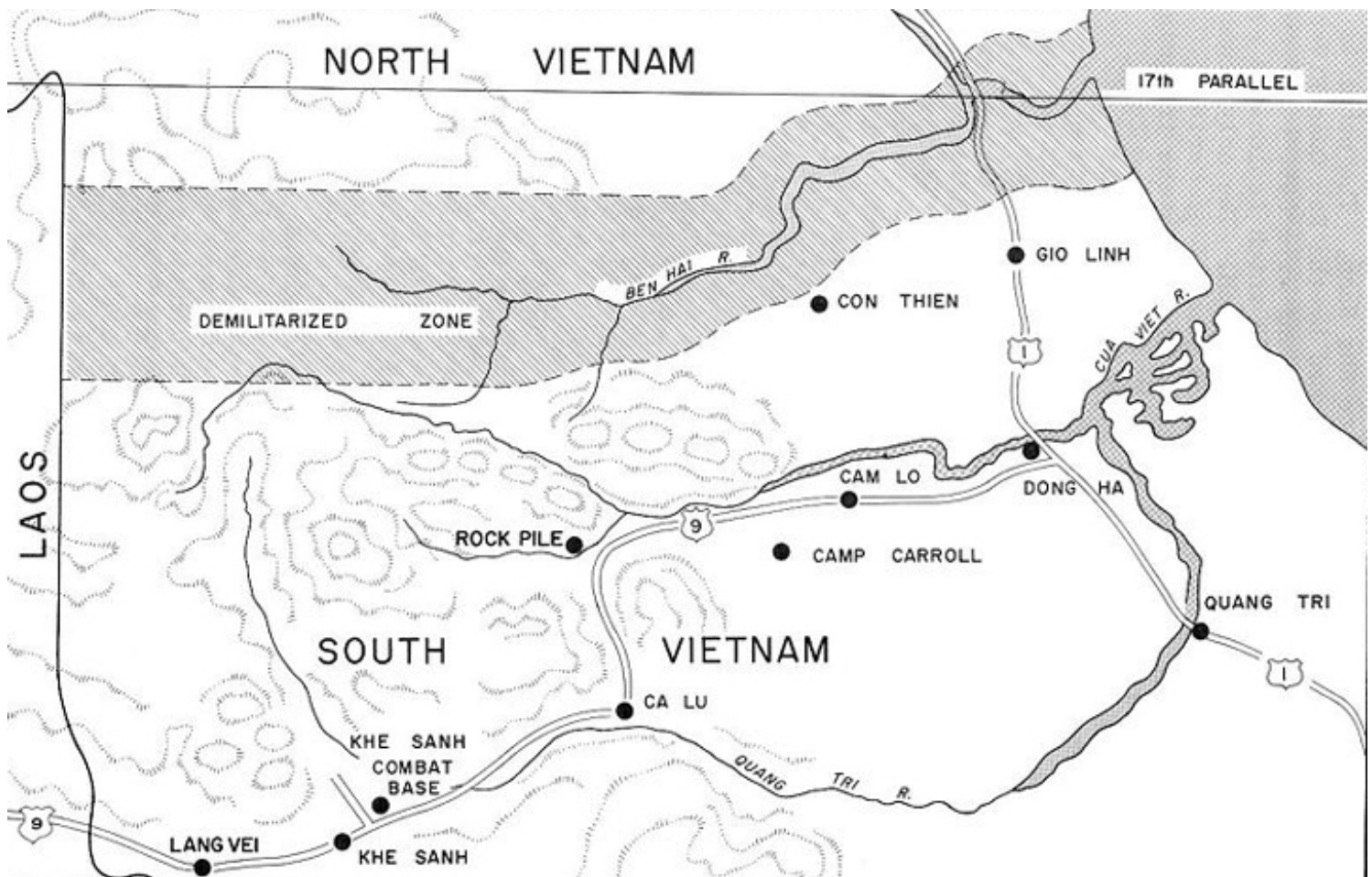


Figure 1. Map of former demilitarized zone (DMZ) in Quang Tri province, Vietnam (1954–1975).
Graphic courtesy of Project RENEW.

Nearly four decades after the end of the Vietnam War, explosive remnants of war (ERW) and unexploded ordnance (UXO) continue to contaminate Vietnam.¹ Estimates indicate that the amount of contamination covers one-fifth of Vietnam's total land area. Although the total number of mine/ERW casualties is not known due to lack of detailed data in Vietnam, there have been a recorded 104,973 casualties (38,940 killed/66,033 injured) since 1975 according to the *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*.² Activities most commonly associated with ERW accidents are scavenging for scrap metal, agricultural activities, and tampering with explosives.³

Project RENEW set out to enhance public awareness of the continuing threat of UXO to the people of Quang Tri province—as well as the work being done to make Vietnam safe. With funding from the Chino Cienega Foundation and Norwegian People's Aid, Project RENEW opened the Mine Action Visitors Center (MAVC) in Quang Tri province in August 2011. Since then Project RENEW and the Quang Tri Provincial Department of Foreign Affairs have jointly operated the Center. More than 6,000 people have visited the MAVC and 4,000 students have received mine risk education (MRE) through the Center.



Children are provided risk education safety messages through games and entertainment activities during MAVC's educational tours.
All photos courtesy of Project RENEW.

Established as the first free and public mine action visitor center in Vietnam, MAVC has served as a regular venue for learning while promoting peace, healing and reconciliation for people around the world. The Vietnam War ended nearly four decades ago, but older people who directly experienced the tragedy of war have shared stories of the past with younger generations. Many of these younger people, who learn more about the war and its aftermath through MAVC's displays and images, draw hope from seeing how the ERW threat is being reduced and eliminated.

MAVC offers an informative display of historic exhibits and artifacts with documentary films, photographs and displays depicting the war's impact and devastation on the land and people of Quang Tri. Visitors learn about the efforts of government authorities, local residents and international organizations to address the ERW problem since the war ended. Visitors are also provided opportunities to contribute to mine action activities within Quang Tri.

In addition to providing information about the war's impact, MAVC addresses ongoing efforts to counter the impact of ERW in Quang Tri province. MAVC's mission is threefold:

- Serve as an information hub, gathering information about the history of the Vietnam War as well as mine/ERW contamination and victim-assistance issues
- Promote peace, healing and reconciliation through displays and training
- Serve as an educational facility for local children and citizens who live with the threat of UXO on a daily basis

The DMZ

Quang Tri province experienced the fiercest fighting of the war, and areas that still resonate with American and Vietnamese veterans include Khe Sanh Combat Base, the Rockpile, Camp Carroll, Con Thien, Doc Mieu and Ai Tu. During the war, Quang Tri was the province most heavily damaged by bombs and other ordnance, which included approximately 328,000 tons of munitions.⁴ The U.S. Department of Defense estimated that 10 percent of this ordnance did not detonate as designed.⁵ What remains on the ground or just under the surface has killed or maimed more than 7,000 Quang Tri residents since 1975.⁶

MRE

Since late 2011, with funding from the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), MAVC has hosted integrated MRE tours for schoolchildren and teenagers from ERW-impacted areas that are rural and mostly poor. After two hours at MAVC, students have a better understanding of the history of the province where they were born, its devastation during wartime and why mine action remains important. Children learn how to identify and respond to UXO dangers through interactive games, role-playing, and crafts, all of which emphasize safe behaviors. Most importantly, children learn how to report UXO sightings to RENEW's explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams for timely removal or safe destruction. They pass this information along to their parents and neighbors, and all become part of the community reporting system, which is the source of most EOD team deployments on a daily basis.



Schoolchildren take part in picture painting activities in the exterior UXO garden of MAVC.

Advocacy

MAVC staff also work to promote the rights of persons with disabilities, raising awareness and organizing events on national and international mine action days when survivors voice their concerns. Storytelling sessions featuring ERW survivors inspire local schoolchildren during integrated MRE tours. With financial assistance and resources from Handicap International in Belgium, some of these survivors have now become Vietnam Ban Advocates and are working with others in a global effort to prohibit the use of landmines and cluster munitions worldwide.⁷

Biographies



Nguyen Thanh Phu is the manager of the Mine Action Visitor Center in Quang Tri province, Vietnam. Phu welcomes visitors to the Center, introducing them to the Vietnam War, its history and consequences, ongoing demining efforts of local people and authorities, and mine action projects funded by international nongovernmental organizations including Project RENEW. Before joining Project RENEW in July 2010



Chuck Searcy works closely with the Vietnamese project coordination manager and Project RENEW's management and technical staff to implement its mission of securing Quang Tri province from the threat of remaining unexploded ordnance. As a member of the Project Steering Board, Searcy works with government officials at the provincial and central levels, and with RENEW management and staff to set policy and coordinate project activities with Quang Tri province's governing and civil-affairs structure. Formerly, Searcy was Vietnam chief representative for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, Vietnam country director of the Vietnam Veterans of American Foundation, and is currently vice president of Veterans for Peace, Chapter 160 (Hoa Binh), the only American veterans organization based in Vietnam.

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Endnotes

1. In Vietnam, the Vietnam War is called the American War.
2. "Vietnam." *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*. Last modified 28 November 2013. http://www.the-monitor.org/custom/index.php/region_profiles/print_profile/816.
3. Associated Press. "Vietnam: Land mines still line 16 million acres." *NBC News*. 31 July 2009. <http://nbcnews.to/1kTwdT0>.
4. Norwegian People's Aid. "NPA Mine Action Programs: Vietnam." *20 Years of Action: Mines and Arms Department Portfolio 2012*: 31. Accessed 26 February 2014. http://issuu.com/folkehjelp/docs/mineportfolio_2012_5.
5. Kim, Phung Tran, M.D., Ph.D and Nam Hoang. "Study of ERW Accidents in Quang Tri Province, Vietnam." *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*, 15.2 (2011): 50–51. Accessed 1 May 2014. <http://www.jmu.edu/cisr/journal/15.2/notes/phung/phung.shtml>.
6. "Vietnam." Mines Advisory Group. Accessed 2 February 2014. <http://www.maqinternational.org/where-maq-works/vietnam/#.U9FejRYE8M>.
7. Vietnam Ban Advocates is a group of survivors who were victimized by UXO in Quang Tri province, Vietnam. The group works to raise awareness of disability rights, advocating for states to accede to the *Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention*, the *Convention on Cluster Munitions* and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

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