

Mass Fitting for Amputees in Tam Ky

The VietNam Assistance for the Handicapped (VNAH), a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization founded by Ca Van Tran, provides prosthetic devices and wheelchairs for victims of explosive remnants of war in rural communities in Vietnam. Ken Rutherford and Cameron Macauley of the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery participated in a mass prostheses fitting led by VNAH in Tam Ky, Vietnam. In the article, Rutherford describes the impact this event has on nearly 200 men and women.

by Kenneth Rutherford, Ph.D. [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]



CISR Director Ken Rutherford and CISR Trauma Rehabilitation Specialist Cameron Macauley visit the Prosthetic Outreach Mission in Tam Ky, Vietnam, March 2012. Photo courtesy of Ca Tran/VNAH.

On 9 March 2012, my colleague, Cameron Macauley, a trauma rehabilitation specialist from the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at James Madison University, and I had the good fortune to participate in a mass fitting for amputees in Tam Ky, Vietnam. When we arrived, some 200 men and women awaited their turns to have plaster casts made for manufacturing new, durable and very comfortable prostheses. They removed their old prostheses, and I was astonished by these ancient, handmade artificial legs constructed of wood, rubber, wire and cloth. Most of them had been broken and repaired numerous times.

We were invited by Ca Van Tran, founder and president of VietNam Assistance for the Handicapped (VNAH), a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization that sponsored the outreach event. Tran regularly visits communities in rural Vietnam to offer free prosthetic devices and wheelchairs to people with disabilities. He uses much of his personal money to support programs for people with disabilities in Vietnam, and is interested in opening new projects in Myanmar (Burma).

“A new arm, leg or wheelchair makes all the difference in the world for these people,” says Tran. “It makes work, play and everyday activities possible, and allows them to live with dignity and self-respect. Nothing gives me greater joy than to see an amputee walk with grace, pride and comfort. Even though the situation is improving for people with disabilities in Vietnam, much more needs to be done.”

The March event was an opportunity for amputees to be fitted for new prostheses to be manufactured in VNAH-supported prosthetics workshops in Da Nang. Tam Ky is home to many people affected by the Vietnam War and the explosive remnants of war resulting from it; however, access to modern mobility devices is difficult.¹ Of the 200-plus amputees at the event, nearly all used worn, outdated, homemade prostheses. Poorly made devices of this type are uncomfortable to use and often lead to skin breakdown on



CISR Director Ken Rutherford and a patient at the Prosthetic Outreach Clinic.
 Photo courtesy of Cameron Macauley/CISR.

a residual limb as well as chronic back pain and joint problems.

After each amputee was fitted for a new prosthesis by having a plaster cast made of their residual limbs, many were transported to the Da Nang workshop where they received new prostheses carefully customized to their needs. They also spent some time undergoing physical rehabilitation and learning to walk with the new device. Amputees who required upper-limb prostheses learned to use their new hands to dress and feed themselves and to ride a bicycle or a motorbike. All of these services were provided free of charge.

These amputees are men and women who have lived for decades without the

benefit of tough, comfortable prosthetic limbs that tolerate physical abuse and exposure to weather. Their residual limbs are calloused and scarred from chafing inside poorly fitted sockets. I saw their joy and relief at the thought of working, playing and taking a relaxing stroll without feeling the pinch and cramp of a barely adequate prosthetic leg.

I lost my legs to a landmine in Somalia in 1993; I know what it means to walk on artificial legs. I have met thousands of amputees in countries worldwide, and I know how important these new limbs are to them. VNAH is providing mobility, comfort, safety and even beauty to the lives of these Vietnamese, many of whom never dreamt that they would

ever be lucky enough to receive a new prosthesis. It was a wonder and a profound delight for me to see such kindness in action.

Tran recognizes the value of being able to walk with dignity and grace, run after a soccer ball and have a leg that will not buckle under your weight. Thank you, Tran, for your dedication to people with disabilities in Vietnam and around the world, and to your efforts of making their lives easier and better. ©

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1. In Vietnam, the Vietnam War is called the American War.