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Reclaiming the Land: A Veteran Revisits Vietnam

J.S. Chadwck

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Reclaiming the Land A Veteran Revisits Vietnam

By J.S. Chadwick

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When is a war really over? When the peace treaties are signed and the armies withdrawn? Or, when ordnance left over from the fighting is no longer killing people? If the answer to the last question is yes, then the Vietnam War is still going on. In Vietnam today people are being killed, or wounded on a daily basis by ordnance left behind by a conflict that should have ended 24 years ago. Most of those people are children. Throughout the Vietnamese countryside there are tens of thousands of pieces of unexploded ordnance (UXO). These UXO run the gamut from M-79 rifle grenade projectiles to artillery rounds and aerial bombs of all sizes. They lie buried or just on the surface waiting to be disturbed. The vast majorities of these UXO were manufactured in the United States, and are causing a great problem for the Vietnamese people. I have recently seen this problem first hand.



Author looking at 60mm mortar rounds about to be destroyed

I had been planning to return to Vietnam for a long time. I served in Vietnam from April of 1967 through the end of January 1969, mostly as an infantryman with the 101st Airborne Division. When I finally decided to make the return trip I started doing some research on the current conditions in that country and came across a book by Donovan Webster titled *Aftermath*. This book drew my attention to the problems of ordnance left behind by the war. I read as much as I could on the subject, but had to see it first hand. I searched the Internet for people actually involved in the work of helping the Vietnamese people deal with this problem. This led me to an organization called Peace Trees Vietnam, and its director, Martha Hathaway. After I explained to Martha what I wanted to do, she gave me the name and email address of Jerilyn Brusseau. Jerilyn is the co-founder of Peace Trees and is the in-country director of its Danaan Perry Landmine Education Center in Dong Ha City. Jerilyn was most hospitable when I contacted her and explained what I wanted to do: visit the people actually doing the work of clearing the land of this menace. I told her that I wanted to see the extent of the problem with my own eyes and the measures being taken to correct it. She welcomed my interest and said that she would make the necessary arrangements.

Walter Bacak, an old friend and former patrol leader from my time with the 101st, now runs an organization called "Quest for Healing" from his home in Seattle Washington. He arranges and leads return trips to Vietnam for veterans trying to integrate their war experiences into their lives in a positive way. He also does his best to promote friendship between the Vietnamese and American people at the individual level. When I contacted him in December 1998 about my plans, he told me that he was planning a tour for March of 1999 and, yes, they would be going directly through Dong Ha City. His itinerary was flexible enough for me to separate from the rest of his group and spend some time with the deminers.

Witnessing the Problem Firsthand

Jerilyn met us for lunch when we arrived in Dong Ha City on 11 March. She explained the purpose of the Landmine Education Center in a few sentences: bring children from all over Quang Tri province to the Center. Once there, educate them to recognize and avoid UXO in order to save their lives. After lunch Walter and the rest of our group proceeded to the former DMZ while I accompanied Jerilyn to the Landmine Education Center.



Danaan Perry Landmine Education Center.

Then began an unforgettable afternoon and evening. The education center is in an attractive building designed to fit in with the local cultural style. The inside walls on the second floor are covered with posters depicting the dangers posed by the wide variety of UXO one can encounter in Quang Tri Province. On a large table were board games that entertained children and at the same time taught them the importance of recognizing and avoiding these still lethal remnants of war.

Jerilyn talked of the many problems to be overcome and some workable solutions. For example, the local transportation system does not make it easy to get children from the most remote part of the province exposed to the unique educational facility. A possible solution is to turn a bus into a traveling education center and take the information to the children. Since children are famous for not listening to adults, she discussed the possibility of taking children who had already been wounded and making them into instructors to illustrate through personal example the dangers posed by UXO. This is an instance where children may well listen to other children more attentively than to an adult. She talked about techniques to make learning more attractive, like brightly colored T-shirts and baseball caps with mine awareness messages printed on them which could be handed out to children who attend the center. Comic books with mine awareness story lines were also discussed. Jerilyn's ideas all sounded very good to me, but as she pointed out, they all cost money and took time to implement, and children are dying now.

Next, I was allowed to see the deminers in action. This began with an introduction to Mr. Gerd Willkommen. Gerd is a German national and a demining instructor employed by the German firm Gerbera in a cooperative effort with the Vietnamese government to teach demining techniques to Vietnamese soldiers sequestered to the demining effort. He and his co-instructor Mr. Fischer had one of their teams actively in the field so Gerd drove Jerilyn and I out to watch. The place was about one and a half miles southwest of Dong Ha City, only about a mile or so from a grammar school.

It was at this place that I began to understand the true extent of the problem posed by UXO. I stood at a distance watching Vietnamese men in blue coveralls and safety equipment sweep hand-held detectors down long lanes defined by wooden pegs and twine. Every time the detector lets out a warning squeal the sweeper must stop and investigate using, very gently, a probing stick and a hand trowel until he finds the cause of the squeal. Often the squeal will be caused by junk! That is to say pieces of metal that are not explosives. Rather, they are old pocketknives, pop-tops from beer cans, beer cans themselves, broken screwdriver blades, etc. The problem is that the detector cannot reliably tell the difference, so every squeal must be investigated as if it were a UXO until proven otherwise. The piece of junk must then be removed and the spot re-swept with the detector until no squeal is heard. Then the deminer can move forward. Each deminer I saw carried with him a bag filled with junk like this.



Mine Awareness display inside the landmine education center. Note board game on table.

Progress under these circumstances is maddeningly slow. It was mid-March, about 78 degrees and overcast, a cool day in Vietnam. I tried to imagine what it would be like sweeping in June, July, August, or September when the temperature might hover just above 100 degrees. The safety equipment I mentioned earlier consists of a Kevlar vest and plastic safety visor, which offer some protection from flying metal fragments but none from the heat.

Earlier in the day Gerd's team had unearthed several UXO and then one more as I watched.

These were placed in two holes dug for the purpose of destroying them. I watched closely as the UXO were placed carefully in the holes and let my memory run back thirty years to identify what I was looking at. The vast majority of it looked American made. I saw one 81mm mortar round, a 75 recoilless rifle projectile, several 60mm mortar rounds (one of which appeared to be of communist Chinese manufacture), several 40mm cannon rounds, and an M-79 rifle grenade round. I talked to Gerd about the day's haul as he supervised the Vietnamese deminers placing the electrical blasting caps into the blocks of plastique explosive that would be used to destroy the UXO. He said, "the smallest like the M-79 are the most dangerous." Puzzled by this, I asked him why. He said, "their appearance makes them the most likely to be picked up by children—they look like toys." The polished aluminum nose cap of the M-79 and a BLU-26, which looks like a tennis ball with fins, would look like a toy if you didn't know any better; it appears a lot of children don't. The plastique charges were put in place, the holes were then covered with sandbags and we got out of there. As we spoke we moved

back about 200 meters, then watched the explosions render the UXO completely harmless.

My eyes were really opened by what followed. Gerd said he had something to show me. We walked a short distance up the dirt road we had used to get to the deminers. There, about 50 meters across the road from some houses was a deminer's nightmares come true. A pile of UXO lying exposed on the ground. They ranged in size from M-79 rifle grenade projectiles, up to a 105mm howitzer round. Sprinkled in between were numerous 40mm canon rounds and even part of a 2.75' aerial rocket, about sixty pieces in all.

I asked where all this stuff had come from. Gerd said that the local farmers found it while plowing or clearing their land and just brought it here and dumped it into a pile. I asked if he was going to carry it off to destroy it? He said no, most of it was too dangerous to be moved. I asked about destroying it in place, he motioned towards the houses across the road and said that they would have to be evacuated first, and the houses might very well be destroyed in the process, so the people would not go willingly. This highlights another problem in demining, discovering UXO in areas where people have rebuilt their lives. So what can one do? Those people will simply have to clear out temporarily while the UXO are destroyed, then come back and rebuild. Easy enough to say if you don't live in one of the houses.

My education continued over dinner with Jerilyn and Gerd. I asked lots of questions, fortunately they had answers. What kind of saturation are you dealing with in terms of numbers of UXOs per area of land? Gerd said that his team had just cleared an area of three hectares (nine acres) and found over 200. Is that typical? Gerd said that because Quang Tri Province was the scene of much heavy fighting that this level of saturation was not that unusual. He added that the saturation was not uniform, some areas having relatively little, others being worse. The problem is that you have no way of knowing if a piece of land is free of UXO just by looking at it; you can't see what is under the surface. You can't consider it safe to use until you actually have it swept by deminers. Until that is done you're just guessing. What do most people do for a living in the Quang Tri province? Jerilyn said that they were mostly farmers whose daily work could be in the areas where most of these things lay just below the surface. I asked how much of Quang Tri province had been cleared? Gerd's answer was "not very much." The extent of the problem was coming into focus for me.



Gerd Willkommen of the Gerbera Demining Team.

There was one last aspect of the problem to be covered. What was the number of people wounded during encounters with these remnants of the war? What was their fate? The morning after I had dinner with Jerilyn and Gerd, I paid a call on Mr. Hoang Dang Mai, director of the Foreign Relations Department for Quang Tri province. He received me



Vietnamese deminers with mine detectors, "JUNK" bag, and safety equipment (i.e., masks and Kevlar vests). Note lack of footwear.

hospitably and answered my questions. I asked how many people had been wounded by explosive devices since the end of the war in 1975? He answered 7000, mostly children at the time they were wounded. What was their fate? Mr. Hoang replied that the burden of providing care fell on the families of the wounded, and that Vietnam was not a rich country. In short, they made out as best they could. I thanked him for his time and honesty then took my leave. I returned to Jerilyn's compound where I met briefly with Mark Thompson of the Mines Advisory Group, a British led and organized team. Mark had had extensive experience in high-density land mine areas such as Northern Iraq, and Cambodia. He and his group were just starting a demining effort along what had been the old DMZ. A fairly high percentage of what they were locating and destroying were land mines per se as opposed to the mostly unexploded artillery and mortars rounds that Gerd's

team had been dealing with. I asked him the same questions I had asked Gerd and got pretty much the same answers except for one new aspect. He said that some of the Agent Orange that had washed down into the soil was being throw back up onto the surface when the UXO were destroyed by demolition. I asked him about the possibility of removing the mines and disassembling them to avoid detonation and thereby recontamination of the surface soils. His answer was that is was much too dangerous to the deminers. I thanked him for his time, said goodbye to Jerilyn, and headed back to Da Nang to meet up with Walt. The rest of the trip has little effect on the purpose for this article so I won't go into it. It is enough to say that Vietnam is a very hospitable country with mostly warm, smiling people.

Towards a Lasting Solution

I went to Vietnam to see the problem of UXO for myself and I did. They are real. Although I only saw it first hand in Quang Tri, it exists all over the country. The ordnance that is killing people in Vietnam today was all put in the ground before 1975, the year the war was supposed to end. The majority of the people being maimed and killed by landmines today were born after that year. The war is still going on for them. Vietnam is an emerging nation trying to develop its economy to provide a decent living for its people. They are reclaiming their land inch by inch. This will not be complete until all UXO are located and eliminated a process that could take generations. The situation could describe any number of third world nations. So why all this attention focused on Vietnam? First, the vast majority of ordnance doing the damage was made in the USA at the direction of the U.S. government. Second, we put that ordnance there during the war. This is no guilt trip, merely a statement of fact. That ordnance was not put in the ground with the intent of lying dormant and killing people thirty years later, it just happened that way.



M-79 rifle grenade round and 40 mm cannon round prior to destruction.

The solutions to the problem are three-fold. Ultimately, the UXO must be disposed of, a long and laborious task. The wounded must be cared for, a very expensive undertaking. The immediate goal is to prevent any more people from being wounded. From what I observed, every child educated and made aware of the danger is a child saved. Education uninjured children is far less expensive, and painful, than trying to care for one maimed and dismembered. Focusing on education seems the way to go. If this article strikes a responsive chord in you, and you want to get involved, contact Martha Hathaway at vizag@aol.com and ask her how you can help. When I send my contribution to Peace Trees Vietnam, I earmark it for "education mines awareness." That way it will go to the land mine education center to teach some child not to touch landmines.