

THE NATIONAL NEWSLETTER OF THE MiVAC TRUST

AUGUST 2010

The MiVAC Trust is the initiative of Australian Vietnam Veterans who cleared landmines in Vietnam and who have seen firsthand the devastation caused by these indiscriminate weapons. It is a voluntary organisation. This has enabled MiVAC to dedicate an average of 95% of its funds raised directly to identified projects.

Membership of the Trust has broadened to include veterans from other conflicts, humanitarian aid workers, members of the Peace Keeping Forces and of course the many civilians who have been touched by the plight of those living in the wake of the remnants and devastation of war.

VALE MIKE ROBERTS

On March 26th, 2010 we received the sad news that Mike Roberts had passed away. Mike had been a supporter of MiVAC since its inception in 2001 and was held in high esteem by MiVAC Trustees and members for his work on behalf of the Trust, [in Cambodia] assisting survivors of landmine incidents and helping communities rebuild their villages with sustainable development projects.

Serving in the Malaya and Borneo Emergency with 3RAR and the Vietnam War with 2RAR, Mike was no stranger to the horrors of landmines. Wounded himself by a landmine, he also lost several mates to these insidious weapons during his time in the Army.

Mike last visited Tasmania in November 2009 and attended our "LAZY SUNDAY AFTERNOON" fundraiser at Brookfield Vineyard. Folk who met him there were captivated by this quiet, unassuming man as he explained the plight of the people in the areas where he had worked as a volunteer – you will have read his articles in previous newsletters about Tum Nub, Kampi, Krati and of course his last project at Kais Village Orphanage.

Mike's family requested that donations collected at his funeral be donated to MiVAC and we anticipate funding a project in Cambodia, which will be implemented jointly with the Cambodian Rural Development Team.



Mike Roberts at Tum Nub with villagers around their new water well – provided by MiVAC donations and Mike's hard work and dedication.



Thanks Mike.....

NATIONAL PATRON – SANDY MACGREGOR MC,RFD Colonel (rtd)

NATIONAL OFFICE – P.O. BOX 967

SANDY BAY TASMANIA 7006

PCL / MiVAC Women's Bomb Clearance Team

The first women's UXO and mine clearance team has been successfully trained and have completed their first job.



Paul Miles trained the team of 10 women from the local town of Houy Kong to Level 1 technician. This training has given the women skills which enables them to gain employment with PCL now and for the future. These women would not normally have had such employment chances or the opportunity to earn well needed wages that they will channel back through their community.

Each member of the team showed great enthusiasm and commitment to the tasks assigned to them. While in PCL employment they are supplied with housing, food, uniforms and transport to and from the site locations. They work 28 days on, 7 days off, this allows them to receive their money in monthly payment to take home to their families. Considering that some of the women cannot read, this has given them a life changing opportunity.

With the first phase of training now over, members of the team will now be assessed for further training up to Level 4 UXO technician.

This programme is an initiative of PCL and is being sponsored by MiVAC as part of ongoing policy of combining demining priorities with socioeconomic goals such as employment creation, income generation, gender equality, skills transfer and capacity building.

PCL and MiVAC are proud of this initiative and of the women's team and the team's progress so far. Their ability to put back into their own communities is not only satisfying but is also something we pride ourselves on and will continue to expand in the future



A "bombie" found by the women's mine clearing team

“Over 2 million tons of bombs fell on Laos during the Vietnam War About 30% did not detonate. On top of this there are about 1000 minefields in Laos. And overall, about 60% of our UXO finds are unmapped.”

Mick Hayes of Phoenix Clearance Ltd.

We are indebted to MiVAC donors and supporters, especially **MOJO COMMUNICATIONS** and **THE MARY FARALLY TRUST** who have assisted the training of these ten women from Houy Kong village, in Champassak Province.

PCL's generous in-kind support also enabled this training project.

The training took place in late May.2010

DONATIONS: To donate to any of our projects please make Cheques payable to **THE MiVAC TRUST** and post to National Office, P.O. Box 967, SANDY BAY, Tas. 7006.

or Via Direct Deposit BSB 037-015 A/c No 155418 Acc.Name MiVAC TRUST No.2

Statement Text/Reference YOUR NAME ** Please forward details via post for receipt

Australian Responsibility for UXO's in Vietnam

CHAS. BOWERS

During a visit to Hanoi several years ago, I met an American VN Vet named Chuck Searcy who developed an NGO there that has been involved in the detection and destruction of UXO's in Quang Tri Province in Central Vietnam. It was brought home to me by Chuck how little is being done by Australia to help repair the damage still being caused by UXO's around the former DMZ (Quang Tri Province). Children and farmers are still being maimed and killed by UXO's, a substantial number of which were fired along that coastline by Australian naval forces active in that area from 1967 to 1970.

During these years the RAN had four destroyers (HMAS Hobart, Perth, Brisbane and Vendetta) on the so-called "Gun Line" cruising 5km off the coast and shelling "enemy" targets such as the road and railway bridges along Highway One and along the North South railway in the attempt to stop the flow of North Vietnam forces and supplies heading to the South.

There was always at least one of our ships on the gun line during this period, and the volume of shells that they laid down was enormous. Each ship was equipped with two quick firing 5 inch guns (4.5 inch in Vendetta's case) and they on average fired 6,000 shells per gun each month. The shells were spotted to the targets by US helicopters and light aircraft, and the US navy estimates that at least 10% of shells fired did not explode on impact, simply sinking into the mud in the rice paddies.

The "Bomb Museum" in Hanoi has on display more than 800 5in naval shells of the type used by the Australian ships in this period. They were retrieved from the mud by the VC and the explosive extracted after they were defused. These shells represent a mere fraction of those shells that did not explode on impact.

The constant flooding of this area due to climate change has caused these shells and other UXO's to come to the surface and many are being scavenged by children to sell for scrap metal, often exploding with disastrous results. Vietnamese deaths and injuries from exploding UXO's far out-number those in either Cambodia or Laos, yet Vietnam fares badly for Australian funding by comparison with these two other aid recipients.

The US veteran's organization RENEW has been detecting and clearing in these areas for many years. Several NGO's have been involved in the clearance of these UXO's, including MAG (Mine Action Group) and, most successfully, RENEW, which is totally Vietnamese staffed, and is funded by US Veterans groups.

RENEW has received some discretionary funding from the Australian Embassy in Hanoi in recent years, but this has been specifically earmarked for medical treatment such as the fitting of prosthetic limbs. The previous government specified that no money be made available to fund UXO and mine clearance in this area. RENEW would be only too pleased to receive Australian government support for their work, and to form a joint work plan with MiVAC.

I think that RENEW is an appropriate organization for MiVAC to carry out this work with, as it has already received Australian government funding, and because it is fully managed and staffed by Vietnamese and supported by the Vietnamese government.

If you can take a few minutes to view the RENEW presentation listed below it will give you some idea of the excellent work they have been doing in Quang Tri Province. This work could be easily expanded if they had access to more funding.

A short video about their work is now accessible on the Youtube website – www.youtube.com/watch?v=dttxOUyLREI

Chas. Bowers has a Masters Degree in Government from Sydney University. He previously had 5 years training at RANC and RNC Dartmouth UK as an Electrical Engineer. He has worked in the NSW Public Service, was a Ministerial Policy Advisor, Manager with the Australian Electoral Commission and served as a District Electoral Officer during UN Elections in Cambodia and East Timor. The year 2000 saw Chas., awarded the Overseas Service Medal by the Australian Government.

JACKFRUIT CROSSING ROAD REPAIR/CULVERT

DEREK SMITH

It has been a very interesting experience; sometimes frustrating beyond belief and at some points along the way, I was beginning to doubt the Vietnam project would ever get started. There were some bumps along the way, not the least of which was Typhoon Ketsana in September 2009. Flooding from that typhoon caused so much damage to the road and crossing site at Kon Katu that the intended MiVAC task there became well beyond the budget.

During our September 2009 visit, the Peoples Committee asked if MiVAC could carry out road repairs at a different site. They were taking on Kon Katu. We relocated to what is now known as Jackfruit Crossing and the project is now complete. The box culverts and road repairs have provided an enormous benefit to village people on both sides of the crossing. Folks can now make the journey during the wet season into Kon Tum without risk of life. Previously some would try to swim across flooded waterways and some would drown. The MiVAC project has removed such risk.

This project received fantastic support from many individuals and organizations. There are too many to name however I must thank in particular our Consulate in Vietnam (DFAT), the National RSL, Matthew Duly and the great people at BBBH Vietnam, GHD Vietnam, SMEC and the many ESO's for their generosity. My sincere thanks to Mr. Nam and the staff at the NGO who we partnered with, East Meets West Foundation. Without EMWF the project could not have happened.

I must also thank my partner in the project, Mr. Dave Penson, CSM, his partner Gwyn Williams, my wife Rhonda and my two sons Michael and Stephen, all of whom spent time in Kon Tum making things happen.

Finally, I would like to thank the MiVAC TRUST members and donors for their generous support.



Derek at Jackfruit Crossing



The completed bridge and culvert

THANK YOU

To Derek Smith, Dave Penson, Walter Kopek, Thai Engineers, EMWF and all who were involved with the Kon Katu Project a well deserved "Thank You" for all your hard work and perserverance on this difficult project which has finally given safe passage to the villagers, and the children at the orphanage.

Rob Woolley Project Officer

Host your own fundraiser for MiVAC. A BBQ at home, involve your school, service club or other community group. Invite a MiVAC speaker to your event.

USA CHAPTER -Stoneham, Mass.

Following the devastating Typhoon Ketsana that hit Vietnam in September 2009, members of the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Chapter, of Stoneham, Massachusetts, collected a container of much needed clothes and other items for the children at the orphanages at Kon Tum. MiVAC Trustees agreed to a request from our MiVAC Rep., Walter Kopek for assistance with funds for the shipping costs. Walter intends to travel to the orphanages to help distribute the donated articles.

Well done to our brothers and sisters in the USA for their hard work and generosity.

LANDMINES – A PERSONAL VIEW

PAUL JEFFRESS

Although the road from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap is sealed it still makes for a long dusty haul. mile after mile of rice paddy punctuated only by the occasional small village adds to the monotony. When the bus reaches Kompong Thom however, you can stretch your legs, quench your thirst on the ubiquitous Coca Cola and grab a quick snack of deep fried crickets. The latter are definitely an acquired taste - one that I have not yet acquired.

After the break most passengers settle into a drowsy slumber for the last few hours until the bus entered a village where the sealed road had been washed away in the last monsoon and the bus had to give way to a procession. Assuming it was an initiation procession for young novices entering the local monastery, I jumped off the bus and muscled my way to the front of the crowd to grab some photos.

No Buddhist novices lay at the head of the procession but instead a bullock dray with a small coffin. My mood turned from exuberance to shock in an instant. A local who spoke perfect English grabbed me by the arm and asked if I were OK. I muttered something about not expecting to see a funeral procession and he explained that the child had stood on a landmine that had blown his leg off. The injury itself did not kill the boy but his parents could not afford to pay his \$65 medical costs so he 'was allowed to die' as if such sacrifices were just a fact of life in such a poor country.

After shaking too many left hands with people in Phnom Penh who had been injured by UXO's this incident stimulated a growing hatred of landmines and other UXO's that eventually led me to MiVAC and the opportunity to work with such earnest colleagues.. I know each of my colleagues has personal reasons far greater than mine to hate landmines but at least we can unite in the common cause of doing our little bit to rid the world of this curse.

MEMBERSHIP

At a Trustees' meeting on 19th April the Trustees considered the question of membership fees and the costs of administering an expanding MiVAC. The Trustees decided to make fees for individual and corporate members annual but these fees remain at \$20 and \$100 respectively. However, this will only apply to new members although longer standing members may elect to make a donation towards administrative costs if they so choose.

Additionally a new category of concessionary member has been created to cover pensioners, retirees, students and unemployed persons. Dues for these members will remain at a once only fee of \$10.

The reason for introducing annual fees for new members is to offset the rising costs of administration, public relations, recruiting new members and fundraising. While membership fees will go to these purposes, donations will continue to go 100% to projects. Projects are increasing in number and scope with some exciting developments that will be covered in this and future newsletters.

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

A member recently gave a presentation on MiVAC to a women's group. Gauging by the questions asked and the number of women who spoke to him afterwards he felt that the presentation had gone down well.

That is until a lady discretely pushed some money into his hand with the whispered words: "This is all I have on me but I want to help what you are doing". He didn't have time to count how much she gave and simply placed it a coat pocket to count later. When he did he unfurled a \$5 note wrapped inside a \$10 note.

Had it been a \$50 note or a \$100 he would not have thought any more of it....but \$15 with the words: "This is all I have on me." With those words and that act of kindness the lady gave so much more than the simple dollar value. She exemplified in that deed that those who give what they do not need give less than those who give what they cannot afford.

Many years hence he will still remember that lady gave more than just \$15; she gave him the inspiration to believe in what MiVAC is all about.

Report from SE Asia Trip - R Rands 20 February 2010

Summary

This report concentrates on Laos. Due to the circumstances of my visit, I did not visit project sites in Cambodia and Vietnam.

1. Preface

As an English-only speaker who had not travelled overland, on my own, in non-English speaking countries, this trip presented several challenges.

My general advice to others who may be inexperienced travellers, embarking on a similar adventure, is either to have a very flexible schedule or a very thoroughly organised one.

Most of the difficulties I encountered arose from assuming that it would be easy to book inexpensive accommodation, and flights between countries, on short notice. My experience is that booking flights on short notice is fraught with uncertainty and offered me no savings. My three week trip was simply too short and insufficiently resolved beforehand to allow completion of the tasks I had set myself, given a few key surprises in the unfolding of events, along with uncertainties I thought I was prepared to meet.

2. Purpose of trip

This trip was intended to provide first-hand evidence of three Southeast Asian Project areas. I represented myself as Trustee and Chairperson of the Mines Victims and Clearance Trust (MiVAC). I informed the organisations involved that I was coming as an observer, on behalf of MiVAC.

I expected to receive current briefings and other such information as was available at the time from representatives of Phoenix Clearance Limited (PCL), in Laos, representatives of Cambodian Rural Development Team in Cambodia and representatives of East Meets West Foundation, in Vietnam. I also had discussions with Walter Kopek, who has very ably represented and supported our work in Laos.

3. Brief description of schedule

I spent two days in Bangkok with Walter Kopek, who had originally intended to join me for the Lao PDR part of my sojourn. He was unable to accompany me due to an unexpected change of circumstances. I thank Walter for his advice, hospitality and assistance; I was a much better prepared observer because of his thoughtful and generous support.

I spent 10 days with PCL, during which I received a thorough briefing and tour of our then-current project, Kohai Communal Rice Lands, Area A (KCRL-A), and a visit to the Saysomboune Special Zone (SSZ). I was also able to spend unexpected additional time in Vientiane at PCL's offices, which provides perspective on aspects of MiVAC's plans for increasing our scope of operations.

Subsequently, I travelled to Hanoi. I had opted not to go to Cambodia, in response to concerns about health issues and associated risks. I opted not to visit Danang, after belatedly discovering that the bus I was on would not arrive until well after midnight on Saturday, leaving no safe interval to arrange travel to the Jackfruit Crossing project site, as well as for connecting transport to Ho Chi Minh City, where I had a flight booked to Singapore, to co-ordinate with my return to Australia.

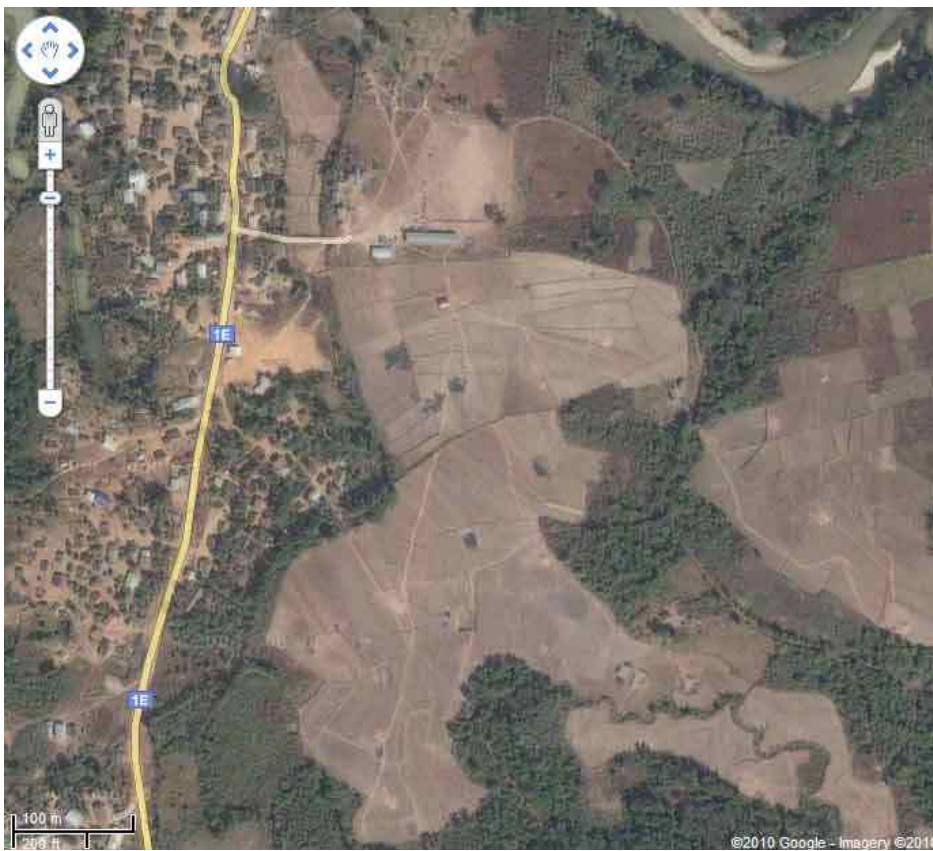


Fig. 2. A Google View of the project area, near the bridge across the Nam Thuen River Road 1E.

The street heading east from Road 1E leads to Kohai School. Communal Rice Lands Area A is to the south of the long building. Bomb craters are visible on the rice fields. These date from the late 1960's and early 1970's, when the area was part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The KCRL-A project area, 8 Hectares, is shown on the report map, Figure 3.

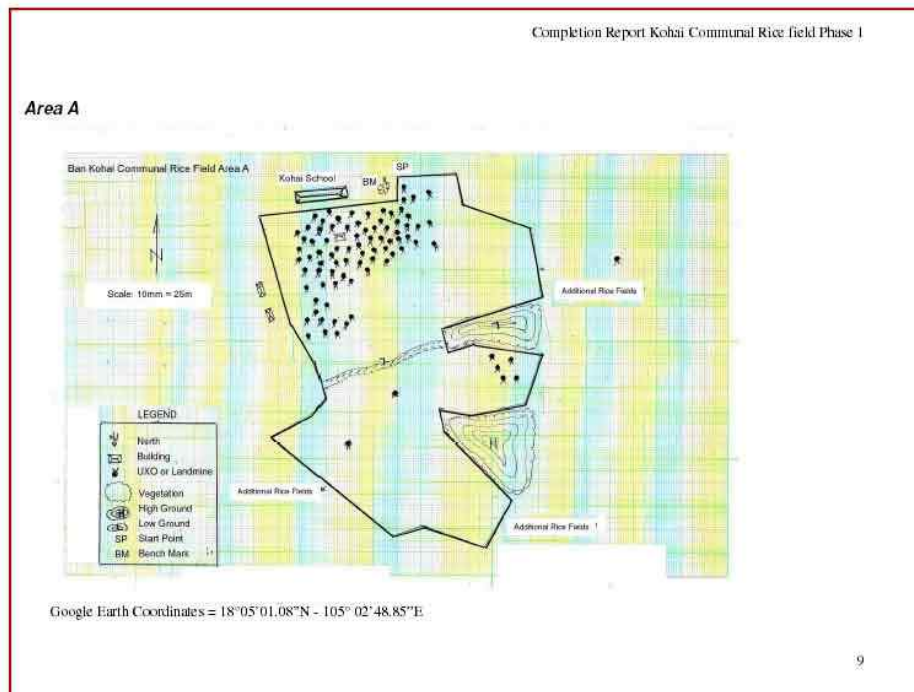


Fig. 3. KCRF-A project area, showing locations of UXO discovered and destroyed. (ref.1)

The completion report summarises:

“Between the dates of 23rd – 31st January 2010, PCL UXO Teams conducted UXO Clearance in an area of Ban Kohai Village Communal Rice lands, a known UXO threat area.

Between the 23rd and 31st January 2010 PCL/MIVAC cleared the first 80,000sqm of an approx 200,000sqm of rice fields and destroyed 87 UXO.

The team also performed a level 1 UXO technician training course for the six locals that have been used in the past two PCL/MIVAC projects and will be working with PCL in upcoming projects outside their home district and province. The village as a whole is extremely grateful for the employment opportunity.

On 31st January 2010 the site was concluded with the site being handed over to the village in an official ceremony.”

I was present from the evening of the 25 January to the morning of the 27th January. My experience was of a convivial and well-organised work force and work culture. The day-to-day operation involved both the routine and unexpected, and my view of events was largely unrestricted. We all shared common facilities and amenities. All matters were handled professionally, in a bilingual environment, under exacting conditions.

I was given a carefully guided tour of the contaminated area and allowed to photograph details of the discovery and demolition procedures. I accepted the offer to “push the plunger”, and destroy UXO, on two occasions. We sheltered behind the school building shown on the maps. We were all housed in the west end of the building, and also shared amenities located about 50 metres N-NW of the school building, on Fig. 3.

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One of the projects under consideration at Kohai Village involves improved housing for the students at the school. This was discussed by Aaron and I on the way to Kohai, and on the 26th, I met with the schoolmaster of Kohai School and the vice-headman of Kohai Village. With Kham’s aid as an interpreter, we agreed that the village has human resources required to plan a building project that would provide either a safer dormitory space or additional classrooms for the school. Currently, there are about 650 students at the school. Secondary students from beyond the village must board in Kohai households or else in bamboo shelters near the amenities area on the school grounds. These shelters are vulnerable to cooking and heating fires. They are barely visible on Fig. 2, around the end of a path going N-NE from the school to the NE corner of the school grounds.

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5. Saysomboune Special Zone

Mid-day on Jan 27th, Aaron, Kham and I left Kohai Village for the Saysomboune Special Zone (SSZ), with the aim of traversing the area to assess its suitability as a focus area for MiVAC in Lao PDR. This area is approximately shown on Fig. 1 by the provincial outline labelled Xaysomboune. We left Highway 13 at PakXan and drove northwest on roads that were varying in quality, but overall not reliably passable except by 4WD.

We stayed the night at a village marked on Google Maps as Ban Dong. Its location on Fig. 1 would be at the T-junction, where the road crosses the Nam Ngiap River, on the NE border of Xaysomboune Province. The SSZ was a stronghold for American-trained Lao fighters, against the Lao PDR government, for over 40 years. It is only within very recent times that the conflict has been resolved. Travel within this area is still restricted. The region is relatively undeveloped, even by Lao PDR standards, although I observed ample signs of development, including electrification and road widening. In places, the road was a challenge for 4WD, due to boulders and also deep mud, where the road cut through groundwater paths on steep hillsides.

We stopped in two villages and talked with people, with Kham's assistance. Fig.4) There is UXO, but no evidence of UXO removal in the areas we visited, although some of the areas had gained improvements in water supply through the aid of foreign NGO's. In one village, possibly that marked as Xaysomboune on Fig. 1, a metalworker is using a 105 mm shell as an anvil. I assumed that the shell is disarmed. (Fig 5).

We returned to Vientiane in the early evening, after a very long day on the road.

6. Vientiane

Discussions with Aaron on the way back to Vientiane included the possibility of MiVAC setting up a volunteer facility in Lao PDR. Because of my circumstances, I opted to remain in Vientiane and explore this idea further, rather than travel to Cambodia while my health issues were unresolved.

PCL graciously provided me with an office space and a computer, as well as valuable advice and other help. I remained until the following Thursday, when I left Lao PDR on the bus. Meanwhile, I made the best I could of this valuable opportunity. One major result was further progress on a proposal for MiVAC to increase its involvement in Laos, including a draft of an Australian Embassy Direct Aid Program grant. Another was a more realistic assessment of the requirements of an overseas volunteer program.

NEW PROJECTS

Rob Woolley, Project Officer

1/ Women's Landmine Clearing Team

Mick Hayes from PCL says this is the first women's mine clearing team put together in Laos. The women who will be trained to do this job are mostly from the ethnic Hmong community and the minefield they will initially clear contains mines called M14. They are a small hard to find mine made almost completely of plastic. The women are happy to gain employment and skills to enable their whole community to live in a safer environment. Demining is a specialist trade and is different to UXO clearance which women have previously done in Laos.

2/ Saysonbourne

After many decades of fighting in Laos, the last of the Hmong rebels have laid down their weapons. An uneasy peace has settled in the area, but the local people do not have much chance of employment, which would make their lives a lot easier.

MiVAC is looking at sending a reconnaissance team to Saysonbourne to talk with the local people, gain their confidence and identify their needs, helping them to overcome their difficulties and become self-sufficient.

I have been liaising with Ben Boyle, formerly an Infantry Officer with 2RAR, who served in East Timor several years ago. At this stage Ben is intending to live with the response team from PCL while they are in the area and report to MiVAC Trustees the immediate and long term needs of the community there.

3/ Kohai Primary School

I have been heartened by the response from MiVAC members Steve and Doreen Carroll, who have travelled to Kohai in Laos recently and were dismayed to see first hand the conditions the children lived in while attending the school. Steve and Doreen intend to fund and build a new dormitory at the school as well as provide a water well to enable the children to have clean water for drinking, cooking and cleaning, etc.

Steve was a former member of the RAE and served in Vietnam and New Guinea.

We think this is a fantastic undertaking and we hope other MiVAC members will support and encourage them in their efforts. More about this project later.

4/ Bomb and Landmine clearing / Vietnam

A MiVAC team led by Major Alex Thompson RAE will visit areas around the DMZ in Vietnam and meet with American Vietnam Veterans from RENEW (see article in this newsletter by Chas.Bowers). This visit will explore the possibility of a working relationship between MiVAC and RENEW with the purpose of future training for Vietnamese in landmine, bomb detection and removal.

Major Thompson served in Afghanistan training soldiers with the Afghan Army landmine clearance techniques.

If you would like to donate to a specific project please contact our National Office or donate through our website

www.mivactrust.org