

# THE NATIONAL NEWSLETTER



## OF THE MiVAC TRUST

[www.mivactrust.org](http://www.mivactrust.org)

**PATRON:** Sandy MacGregor MC, RFD, Colonel (rtd)

**SEPTEMBER 2011**

The MiVAC TRUST is the initiative of Australian Vietnam Veterans who cleared landmines during the Vietnam War and witnessed the devastation caused by these indiscriminate weapons. MiVAC is primarily a fundraising body, a voluntary organization allocating much needed funds to projects identified to the MiVAC Trustees by Australian deminers, or others who are, or have been, involved with de-mining, health or education projects overseas. Membership of the Trust includes veterans from other conflicts, humanitarian aid workers, members of the peace-keeping forces and other service personnel, and of course the many civilians who have been touched by the plight of those living in war torn countries.

Welcome to our new Project Officer Steve Carroll, former Australian Army Engineer now recommencing his work for MiVAC in Laos, community building and village reconstruction work. This newsletter includes two stories from Steve, "A story from Laos" and "Ban Xai" relating his observations of a community still suffering the effects of the illegal bombing of Laos during the Vietnam war.

### A STORY FROM LAOS

No one knew his real name, but he was known to all the children in that part of Laos as Two pockets. For more than two years now they had been warned to keep away from him. "He is a bad man. He will get you killed." Parents and other grown-ups would tell them week after week. It was easy to say but how could they keep away when he had so much to offer them?

In the children's eyes, Two pockets was a kind and generous man as well as being rich and important. He was the owner of a large motor lorry with a canopy covering the back. More importantly somewhere under that canopy was a freezer containing icy-pops and cold fizzy drinks. Few of the local Hmong kids had ever experienced the delight of these confections before Two pockets had given them free samples. In fact few of the adults had had that experience either. The Hmong people were very poor and 800 kip or 10 cents American that each of these cost represented more than the average adult could earn for a days' labour. For instance; some of the mothers would spend a whole day walking the streets with a basket of mandarins hawking them on behalf of a stall- holder. As payment, for every twenty mandarins she sold, she could have two, either to take home to her family or to sell for herself. Not many days would she achieve the sale of

the required twenty and therefore earned nothing. In that light it's easy to see that these wonderful luxuries that Two pockets gave to the kids free of charge made him seem like some kind of latter day Santa Clause.

Two pockets was possessed of an incredible memory. He only gave his free gifts to any child once. Of all the hundreds of kids in the district, he never forgot who had been given the benefit of his largess. When a child came back to ask for more (as they all did eventually) Two pockets would put his arm around them like a loving parent and gently explain that he couldn't afford to give any more than one of each to any child. Well not for free that is. They could do a little bit of work for him he supposed. That way they could earn enough to buy as many confections as they wished, the harder they worked the more they could afford.

"That is how I bought this truck" he told them. "And you can do the same but you must keep it a secret from the adults. If they find out they will stop you because they are jealous" And then he would add the clincher. "You could even earn enough to enable you to attend school when you turn twelve years of age.

Few six year olds could resist that kind of offer and so a contract was entered into.

To clarify things a bit let me explain that the Hmong kids, between the age of five and twelve, had little daytime supervision. Both parents had to work from daylight to dark just to keep their families fed and housed, many had only one parent alive so they were left pretty well to their own devices. Just like kids anywhere else when left to their own devices, energy and imagination took over until a predator like Two pockets came along.

Two pockets was a predator, make no mistake about that. He was not a sexual predator in fact he was physically gentle with them. He had often been seen applying band-aids or bandages to cut and bruised fingers a legacy of their work. Never-the-less he was a predator.

The contract with Two pockets was, as I said before, a secret one each child sworn to secrecy. He would supply the kid with a hessian shoulder bag and a small but heavy hammer. They could have the use of these two items on a lease arrangement. These had cost him a huge amount of money but he would trust the kid to look after them and only charge a minimal amount for their hire fee. A small deduction would be made from the kids' earnings to cover that. The job itself was to collect scrap iron which could be found in the country side all around them. Scrap iron came mainly in the form of cast iron shrapnel. There was no shortage of shrapnel it was to be found almost anywhere especially around humps and hollows in the ground, old bomb craters. All the contractors had to do was to sift through the dirt until they located a piece. They would be paid two cents American for every pound of iron they brought to him.

To avoid unwanted scrutiny by the authorities and concerned parents, Two pockets rarely stopped at the same location twice. One morning he could be found near the day market and the next day on the outskirts of town, that afternoon he'd be seen behind the playing field. There was no pattern to his schedule. Be that as it may the children always knew where to find him.

Whenever one the kids arrived with their pathetic little bag of shrapnel Two pockets would delve into the back of his lorry and produce a small kitchen scale with a bowl on top like the ones used for measuring the ingredients of a cake. After tipping the contents of the bag into the bowl, Two pockets would make a show of reading the scale and then make an entry in a small notebook he carried on a string around his neck. Ceremoniously he would delve into his right trouser pocket and with a flourish produce a handful of coins and notes. After once again consulting his notebook he

would then count out about one thousand Kip the equivalent of twelve American cents. Back to the notebook just to make sure, then with his left hand he would remove one hundred and sixty Kip or two U.S. cents and deposit that into his left trouser pocket explaining that the deduction was for the hire of the bag and hammer. With a smile that would warm hell he would tell how proud he was to be associated with such a good worker and that such a worker deserved a reward. Again with the left hand he would scoop the remaining money into his left pocket and with the other hand produce an icy pop. "Next time you should be able to save a little money if you work harder" He would tell the kid who thought he'd just won the lottery. It was this method of accounting that had earned Two pockets his name.

On the whole, the kids were completely honest with and loyal to their master. If for one reason or another they were unable to continue in his employ, they would return their bag and hammer. He, gained their continuing loyalty and silence by giving them free of charge, a cold bottle of fizz and a reminder not to talk to adults about his business.

A large proportion of the bombs that had been dropped on Laos had casings of cast iron, which is very brittle and therefore ideal for becoming shrapnel when blown apart by the explosive charge inside them. Over two million tons of such bombs were dropped on Laos between 1964 and 1973 they ranged from 1000lb blockbusters to tiny golf ball sized cluster bomblets and were concentrated along the highlands where the Hmong people lived. It is estimated that thirty percent of those bombs did not explode on impact. As a result, even today, three hundred people fall victim to these remnants of a long gone war every year. And it wasn't even their war.

Two pockets was well aware of the danger that he was exposing these kids to. He was even more aware however, of the shortage of iron for the industries in his country. Laos had no ore deposits of its own and no money to import it. Laos was dependant on scrap and bombs were scrap. Large unexploded bombs brought in a good profit once the deadly contents had been removed. If the kids asked about danger he would laugh and tell them that there was no danger if they smashed a bomb up using their hammers on the thick plain end and kept away from the pointed end where the detonating device was and they believed him. His advice may have saved some lives we will never know. What we do know is that one group of about six kids was found sitting on a 1000lb bomb which they had

already broken open with hammers. The little hands and feet were discoloured by the exposed chemical explosive and the untouched detonator was still active. Loyal to their benefactor, they would not admit to working for someone, such was Two pockets influence over them.

Other kids in his employ were not so lucky. Some body parts of two little boys were discovered near a smoking crater, one torso had the remnants of a hessian bag burned into it.

About the same time an Australian volunteer group whose primary aim was to clear up the remnants of war, began an educational program in that town. Through an interpreter they spoke at schools and with government approval set up notice boards with pictures of several different bombs that were common to the area. The pictures were numbered and a simple map of the area was reproduced and divided into grid squares. The instructions were that anyone finding or knowing of one of the pictured bombs should insert the number of the relevant picture in the grid square where it was found.

The board would be monitored monthly, that way the bomb disposal technicians could investigate and dispose of anything dangerous. At the end of the first month there were twelve items marked on the grid including one very large bomb. The organizers were very happy with the initial result, it seemed that their efforts were about to pay off.

The clearance team soon located the first two uxbs, they were BLU bombies beneath a deserted grass hut and were quickly dealt with. After a simple lunch the team set off to locate the large bomb said to be on a sand bar in a stream about three miles away but this time they were not so lucky. They found the location with no effort but there was no bomb to be seen. Instead, on the sandbar was a large hole with loose damp sand piled up around it. In the bottom of the hole was a mass of green-black crystalline powder, the explosive remnants of a 500lb aerial bomb. Of the body

or casing there was no trace. To the team the picture was clear. The sandbar was covered in tiny footprints. Twelve bombs had been reported but only seven had been found and disposed of the remaining five had, obviously, been broken up by children and taken away. That night frantic E mails and phone calls went back and forth between the clearance team and their volunteer sponsors. Finally a resolution was agreed upon. They would remove the map and replace it with a request to report all sightings to the police station. It seems they had simply been providing the kids with a quick find reference guide and putting them at further risk. Two pockets and his little contractors had experienced a bumper month.

I would like to be able to tell you that Two pockets has been blown to pieces by one of the bombs or that an irate grieving parent exacted some suitable revenge on him but I can't. He has not even been arrested. He and many more like him still thrive at the expense of the more vulnerable inhabitants of this beautiful and friendly country.

These exploiters thrive because the citizens are poor and lack education. The Hmong in particular, are still not accepted as full citizens, they are on the bottom rung of a nation that is itself on the bottom rung of world prosperity.

The way ahead is a long and arduous one. Land must be cleared of explosive remnants, sustainable food production encouraged, clean water and sanitation made available. The things that you take for granted, the value of human life, a fair go and education for kids. Only when these goals have been achieved can predators like Two pockets become a memory of a sorry past.

You can be part of the process of advancement, Join the MiVAC team become a volunteer or donor or simply a member. You can make a difference.

Written and authorized by R.J. Steve Carroll. Trustee Elect and Project Officer for the MiVAC Trust.

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## LandmineDetection

When I researched landmine detection, I was amazed by how many methods have been tried. The following short article lists some of them.

It is important that demining is thorough and complete, and that absolute safety from setting off a landmine has been accomplished. This is a long and expensive job. It is made more difficult because very many landmines have been laid, and they are often not visible, lying inactive until disturbed (perhaps by a plough, machine or digging animal). Often the progress of community development depends on thorough previous mine clearance.

Mine detection methods can be divided into several categories:

1. Manual: This is usually done with mine detectors or prodders. For safety, the operators should be well-trained and the detectors should be of good quality. Danger ensues when untrained children buy cheap detectors in order to find mines as income for scrap metal. Therefore, alternative income-generating activities must be found for communities which depend on income from scrap-metal.

2. Mechanical: This involves machines which both detect and remove mines. Usually the machine is armoured, sometimes remote controlled, exploding mines as it goes over them. Controlling remotely limits the risk to the operator. Terrain and vegetation may prevent use of machines.

3. Insects: Honey bees are being trained to detect mines by smell. They are not expected to replace dogs, but to work in conjunction with them. Bees have the advantage, of course, of putting no weight on the ground.

4. Animals:

(i) Dogs: Sometimes called 'sniffer dogs', they are trained to smell out explosives.

(ii) People: I have heard horrifying reports of captured civilians being forced to walk across a minefield ahead of their captors, thus detonating mines and sustaining terrible injuries, while clearing a path for the soldiers.

(iii) Rats: These are trained to detect landmines by smell, and are lightweight. Most are trained in Tanzania for work in Mozambique. They are known as Hero Rats.

(iv) Dwarf Mongoose: These have similar characteristics for landmine detection as rats.

(v) Sea lions and dolphins are being trained to detect sea mines.

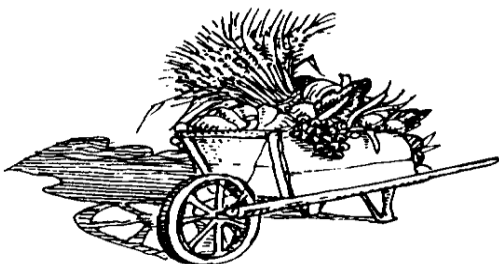
5. Plants: The genetically modified mustard, *Arabidopsis thaliana* changes colour when nitrous oxide is given off by landmines.

6. Bacteria: One species is known to fluoresce when TNT from corroding munitions is present.

7. Other methods being investigated include: nuclear detection; acoustic detection (using sound waves and lasers); ground penetrating radar (can detect non-metallic mines, but also picks up things like roots and stones); and dual sensors, combining ground-penetrating radar and mechanical mine detectors.

In choosing a mine detection method, a range of factors need to be considered. It includes such things as terrain, cost, efficiency and number of mines. Sometimes it is preferable to teach mine detection to the local people, as this may provide a much-needed income stream and encourage capacity building, rather than have a foreign country send in expensive machines with highly-trained operators. Thus mine detection, if the method is carefully chosen, can produce spin-off advantages for individuals, communities and the local wildlife.

By Gill Paxton



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# Sometimes Bombs End up in very Strange Places

By Jim Harris

Sometimes looking for bombs is pure science. We look out over the surface of a landscape and haven't a clue where the suspected ordnance lurks. All we can do is crank up our metal detectors (devices that are both sophisticated and expensive — a far cry from what you would use to find coins on the beach!) and systematically sweep the area, trusting that our technology will allow us to find every single item, big or small, old or new.

Scientists have bred dogs, rats, pigs and even wasps to display indicating behaviors in the presence of minute particles of TNT. A few years ago I watched a frolicking Black Lab search for ordnance. The pooch, on loan from the Swedish army, found a five-hundred pound bomb that had been buried 18 inches underground for over thirty years. I suppose that if you can teach pigs to sniff out a truffle, teaching them to sniff out bombs should be just a matter of determining what reward will keep them working. We don't employ animals in our operation, but their use in other countries indicates how bomb detection has evolved and changed as scientific knowledge has expanded.

On the other hand, sometimes finding a bomb amounts to nothing more than a good old-fashioned Easter egg hunt. We're on a roll here: for three days straight our Response Team has been called to villages to remove bomblets that people found when they were gardening, herding livestock, collecting firewood, or foraging for edible plants. In each case we've arrived at the scene within hours of receiving a report. At each location, knowledgeable villagers have led us confidently to the place where they last saw the bomb or rocket, only to discover that the ordnance had disappeared. And each time we had to search the area like children looking for eggs on Easter morning.

For over thirty-five years, Lao villagers have lived with the scourge of bomb-infested land. Over those many years villagers learned that they could depend on no one but themselves to keep their family and their livestock safe. No police officer, fire fighter, soldier, or bomb technician could be counted on to assist. If a father worried that his children might tamper with a bomb found in the woods, he had best get rid of it himself.

If the chief of a village learned of unexploded ordnance in the community, he or she would often take responsibility to remove the items, knowing full well that handling bombs or rockets could end in death or dismemberment. People just did what needed to be done; they asked for no special thanks and did not consider themselves heroes. They just did what fathers, mothers, elder brothers or sisters were supposed to do: protect the others in their families.

But what to do with the ordinance? How far to carry it? Where to put it? How much risk to take? People usually made sensible choices. They placed the ordnance where they assumed no one was likely to venture. They dropped them down wells, threw them into ponds or rivers, or buried them in the bottom of bomb craters — but only if these repositories were nearby. If not, the person holding the bomb would look for a second-best location. When we know that a bomb has recently “walked away,” we scan the area and ask ourselves, “If I had a bomb in my hand and I wanted to place it where no one else would stumble on it, where would I put it?” Then the hunt begins.

Today we found several items, all sitting on top of the same tree stump: a deadly little nest containing two bomblets, a mortar shell, and a rocket. It's impossible that those four pieces could have ended up on that stump in the ordinary course of warfare. Some brave soul placed them there so that others in the village would be safe. While we were searching for these items, we happened upon a previously unreported bomblet in the hollow of a

tree. It's remotely possible that it landed there forty years ago; more likely, some concerned father or mother placed the bomb in the hollow.

A couple of days ago we were looking for two missing bomblets. Vilisack, the senior member of our five-person team, is the best man to have on a hunt. I watched him as he checked all the usual places. Stumps, hollow trees, animal burrows. Then he carefully approached a deserted termite mound that had begun to sprout grasses and shrubs. Sure enough, there on top of the mound sat the two missing bomblets ... or, maybe not? On the backside of the same mound were two additional bomblets! Which pair were the two we were looking for? And which two had been placed on the mound days, months or perhaps years earlier?

Sometimes what looks like a safe resting place for a bomb creates a future hazard. A bomblet placed on top of an ant hill might, within a few years, be swallowed up by the growing mound and disappear from sight. I know three children who lost their mother to long-forgotten ordnance. The young mother was using a steel hoe to remove a termite mound from her garden and was unaware of a cluster bomb buried inside the mound. She was killed when her hoe struck and detonated the bomblet.

A bomb placed in the fork or hollow of a tree might safely rest there for decades — away from foot traffic, but a potential threat to villagers who cut timber or burn the land in preparation for planting. Bomb craters often become a site where people collect and burn rubbish; a crater is no safe place to stockpile ordnance. Ponds and rivers are not much better. During the rainy season, ponds and rivers swell; in the dry season, they shrink and dry up. I'd think long and hard before digging around in the bed of a dried pond in this part of Laos — and then, I wouldn't dig.

A couple of days ago we dashed to Phonphanpek village to deal with a bomblet that was found under a log, near several houses. When we arrived, the fellow who had found the bomb informed us that he had already moved it. We asked him to show us where he had placed the bomb, and he said something about having to get his boots. Assuming that he was going to put on footwear before leading us to the location, we waited for his return. When he reappeared a minute later he was barefoot but carrying a single boot. He explained that to make certain that his children didn't get curious and inspect the bomb he had hidden it in one of his boots.

We advised him to gently set the boot on the ground. Then, we modeled how to slowly back away from it. When my teammates and I stopped laughing we had to design a plan to demolish the bomb right where the fellow placed it: six feet from his own front door. A couple of hours later, with the bomb buried beneath bulging bags of sand, we banged it away after sliding a block of TNT down the boot. Fortunately for the homeowner, we succeeded in destroying the bomblet without putting any holes in his walls or roof. Unfortunately, the guy lost one good boot. We take risks in this work, but we know better than to roll a bombie around for the sake of a boot.

We are working hard to let 6,000 villagers in 15 resettlement villages know that our newly formed Response Team exists, and that we move fast to destroy any ordnance reported to us. However, the idea that anyone would respond immediately to the discovery of ordnance is so far outside the experience of villagers that it's a struggle to convince them that they don't need to continue risking their own lives.

We see each newly-discovered bomb as an opportunity to prove ourselves to villagers. During one recent month, people in seven of the 15 resettlement villages we serve needed our help. In that month alone, we removed 837 items, ranging in size from bomblets to bazooka shells. All were potentially lethal. We destroyed a lot of ordnance; we hope we built a little trust.

Thank you to Jim Harris for kindly allowing us to reprint this article. Jim is the President of We Help War Victims (WHWV).

## OLD PROJECT ENDS NEW ONE BEGINS

November will see the final touches take place at Kohai School in Eastern Laos and the following week work will commence on a brand new project at Ban Xai up in the North.

Dorene (my wife) and I will be doing a jaunt through Cambodia before delivering the electronic keyboard so kindly donated by Elizabeth Lewis-Gray, to the secondary school at Kohai. While there we will fulfil our promise to put rattan walls on the primary and infants classrooms and provide a whiteboard (donated by Judy Clark) and some books to form the basis of a much-needed library for the older kids, now living in the dormitories built by MiVAC last year.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of November we will attend the wedding of our dear and valued friends John Phillipson and his fiancé Vanh in Vientiane. This young couple have been invaluable to us interpreters and go-betweens.

After the wedding it's off to Ban Xai to get the ball rolling on our new project. Ban Xai is the first of about seven villages of interest in the area and lies 30 kl west of Phonsavan, the capital of Xieng Khuong province.

Our first task will be the construction of a 20x6.5m concrete block building, which will initially serve as our HQ, store house and accommodation. An ablution block will be the next priority, then the main task can begin.

The overall plan is to create an integrated farming system that is self-sustaining with Cassava and Kale crops, pig, cow and chicken pens, fish ponds and a methane-producing bio digester. The veggies feed the animals, the pig and cow manure fuel the bio digester, the chicken manure feeds the fish, the sludge from the digester and fish pond go back to feed the cassava and kale as fertilizer and the cassava, kale, fish pigs and cows feed family after being cooked on heat from the methane gas burning stove.

There will be many obstacles to overcome before and during the life of the project. A clean and regular water supply is just one of them. Wells will need to be established. Storage tanks and reticulation are formidable tasks on their own.

Our aim is to have volunteers oversee the project on a progressing roster of two and four weeks. We have been lucky to secure the services of a Lao National in-country manager. His name is Onceo Onmanee and has worked with both Sandy McGregor and me. His presence will ensure the continuity of operations.

It is envisaged that Ban Xai will become our show-piece in Lao and act as a (model village) for further works as more mine fields and uxos are cleared.

If you are interested in volunteering for this or any other project please contact MiVAC. We will be publishing progress reports in the newsletter on a regular basis so that you can share our excitement in this great new MiVAC initiative.

RJ Steve CARROLL

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## G'DAY from Derek – news from Kon Tum, Vietnam

We have things under way at VS4 and 5. Sr. Lien asked us to put in a well which they will use to draw water for washing. They are currently using the fish pond. They will construct a sort of revetment on the creek side of the pond. It will come to about \$1300 so no problems there.

At 5, we are putting in 3 toilets for the boys and have incorporated 3 showers and wash hands areas. This will be about \$1300 also.

We can then look at providing stuff for the new kitchen/dining room at VS6 with the balance.

More info about Kon Tom in the next Newsletter.

