



The Latest News
on the
Ban Xai Project
Newsletter #12
27 July 2012



A thumbnail sketch of Potten, a Lao friend from Ban Xai.



It was six thirty am and we had been awake ever since the first herd of cows and buffalo came jingling their bells past our new, if somewhat primitive, abode on the outskirts of remote Ban Xai village in Laos. I was midway through cooking our breakfast of ham and tomato omelette when i become aware of someone standing behind me. I knew it was not my wife Dorene because I had just seen her entering our outhouse and we were sole occupants of this experimental farm. With a great deal of self-control I turned slowly, the plastic egg slice in my hand held firmly at the ready.

I don't know exactly how I felt about the character standing silently, two meters away, but I can say that his expression did nothing to diminish the goose-pimples that were raising the hair on the back of my neck. He was no taller than me, say 5ft 6 inches, nor was he young and his attire was minimal. A pair of tattered shorts, a machete hanging from a cord about his waist, a woven bag slung around his neck, and bare feet. All of this was taken in, in a flash, because my eyes were drawn magnetically to his. It was the most intense focal confrontation I had ever known. His expression told me nothing, yet asked a hundred questions in that instant. I knew that here was a man who would be a true and staunch ally or a relentless foe and the choice was mine to make. I chose the former.

I broke the ice with the formal greeting "sabai-dee", drawing out the last syllable and bowing my head over my joined palms as if in prayer and waited. When his like response came, accompanied by a wide smile I felt it safe to breathe again.

Through the use of sign language our visitor invited himself to breakfast, seeming to find our dietary habits hilarious. We found his using eight spoonfuls of sugar in his coffee just as funny. Such are the foundations of lasting friendship.

My first impression of Potten (that is his name) was to be afraid. Later I found out that his was the same. He did not know who or what we were and so had reason to be afraid - afraid of the unknown, and therefore confronted us. Potten is his name, and in our irreverent Aussie way I have nick- named him "Perforated Pete", because of the many shrapnel scars on his body.

He was born in 1960 and is the father of 7 children and some grand kids. At the age of 15, in 1975, Potten was inducted into the Pathet Lao Army to fight what he calls the CIA and General Vang Pow's forces. He had needed no inducement to fight against the CIA, having lost his mother to bombing in the secret war in 1970 when he was 10 years old. His father was also a soldier and had been wounded by the CIA's army. At first Potten was used as a courier and during that time had the top of one ear shot off. Later because of his close proximity to both sides he was recruited as a spy, reporting on the movements of the enemy.

After hostilities had ceased he reverted to farming and being a husband and father, eking out a comfortable existence. Then tragedy struck. While weeding a paddock he struck a bombie with his hoe and became one of the daily statistics of the remnants of war.

It took three months of intensive treatment to repair his shattered arm and punctured intestines but this man is incredibly tough. Today he still works his

farm, hunts and gathers mushrooms. Even with his evident injuries this man is as strong as an ox. He single handedly picked up, carried and deposited thirty concrete fence posts before breakfast one morning and then went happily off to work ploughing his paddocks until dark

Winning this wonderful man over as a friend was in great part due to Dorene's interaction with him and his family. He has adopted her as his replacement mother. On the day we left Potten refused to let us leave until we promised that at least one of us would return before next year. Should any of you take the next step and go out to Lao to see or participate in our project, make sure that you meet him. You will be a better person for having done so.

Steve Carroll

Photos below show Sandy MacGregor getting a ride to Hinmou Pueng with Potten, looks like he has commandeered Sandys raincoat.



Lao Cuisine for the (very) Hungry.

Some of the food on sale at Tham Piu on Lao New Year. On the right are buffalo intestines and duck eggs with a duck in the egg. On the left is chicken feet, pig and cow ear and I can't recall what is on the sticks. Needless to say there were not many phalang (westerners) lining up.



Further to our story about the mine clearance dozer, Ian Mulroy who is working in Lao for group called Milsearch has sent the following info.

Had a close up look at the dozer by invitation it doesn't actually detect UXOs it breaks up the ground and seives for small UXOs such as the prevelent BLUs, its definately a no show if aircraft bombs are suspected. It May detonate some UXO as it breaks the ground, its definately a large organisations tool.



Plain of Jars

A visit to Lao PDR, Xieng Khouang Province would not be complete without a visit to the Plain of Jars sites.

There are three sites spread over a vast area comprising hundreds of large stone jars. According to "Lonely Planet" they are dated between 200 BC and 400 AD and not much is known about them.

Many have been extensively damaged during the bombing raids during the war. The sites were cleared by MAG, a British organisation clearing uxo's in Lao, and thousands of uxo's and pieces of shrapnel were removed to allow tourists to visit the sites safely.



Clever use of cluster bomb casings.

With the number of cluster bombs dropped on Lao during the war the locals have found some clever and inventive uses for the casings. In this village piercing for buildings are made from bomb casings which are termite proof, long lasting and plentiful. Fences have also been made from the casings and we even saw a BBQ made from a half casing.



Vientiane Times- 30 May 2012

Xay village chief in Xieng Khuang province, Mr Bounsong (*left*), receives a handover certificate for a newly UXO-cleared field from Director of Mivac Steve Carroll (*centre*) and Project Manager of Phoenix Mine Clearance (PCL) Garry Wijnands. Mivac is an Australian charitable organisation which has been using PCL to clear UXO in Laos. The latest land clearance, which finished in May, has freed up fields for agriculture and stock. The company has already cleared UXO from 3 fields and plans to clear another 5 after the rainy season.

--Photo Garry Wijnands





If you are new to MiVAC.

If you are new to this newsletter then you could look at our history in previous editions. You can find them under NEWS at <http://www.mivactrust.org/>

So, this is the twelfth of the updates about the Ban Xai project in Xieng Khouang Province in Lao PDR. Please forward this Newsletter to others and encourage them to join and donate to MiVAC at <http://www.mivactrust.org/> .

Take action- you can assist and make a difference.

From the Ban Xai Team, MiVAC.

