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The Flavor of Danger

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The Flavor of Danger



DOES DANGER HAVE A FLAVOR? It is a hidden ingredient in most Laotian meals. Right below the surface, mixed with chile and spice, peril pervades many baskets of rice, plates of *laap*, and bowls of *or lam* stew.¹ It is hazardous to plant and reap a garden in Laos. It is risky to build a fence or tether a cow. Even the jungle greens eaten with little balls of sticky rice harbor danger for the villagers who forage them.

Lue Ha knows. One rainy day, about six years ago, he set off from his remote village on a trek through nearby forests. “My parents called me and said I should go to the mountains and look for some herbs.” He could sell the wild

Above: Tao Lee squats next to three M1 fragmentation cluster bombs found in a cleared field overlooking Etoum. When the field was lit to clear it, the fire “cooked off” several other bombs. They rained shrapnel on the village in the middle of the night, forcing its temporary evacuation. Etoum lies on a crossroads of the old Ho Chi Minh Trail and was heavily bombed during the Vietnam War. The Lao government moved Etoum from a nearby location to its current spot atop the heavily bombed patch of ground a few years ago. Locals now must contend with UXO (unexploded ordnance) throughout their new village and farmland.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JERRY REDFERN © 2006



medicinal leaves and earn a little cash for his family. So he tromped through hilly terrain and came upon a shrub the size of his forearm. When he dug around the plant to uproot it, something exploded. The world went black; he couldn't see. Lue Ha lay all night on the forest floor beneath heavy monsoon rains. His neighbors searched for hours the next day. "They found blood on the hillside," he says. Eventually they found Lue Ha, blinded and covered in wounds.²

Lue Ha's shovel hit a bomb that had lain in the soil nearly forty years. Between 1964 and 1973, the U.S. military carpeted the country in explosives. Many of the devices were cluster munitions made of large casings packed with

hundreds of little "bombies." The casings opened in midair, scattering softball-sized bombs across the land.³ Lue Ha's shovel most likely struck a bombie.

The U.S. military flew more than 580,000 bombing missions over Laos—the equivalent of one raid every eight minutes for nine years.⁴ It was an offshoot of the Vietnam War, in an effort to stymie communist forces traveling along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But in reality, bombs dropped everywhere.⁵ And many failed.



Up to 30 percent of the explosives did not detonate.⁶ The reasons vary—human error, mechanical malfunction—but UXO (unexploded ordnance) today remains as volatile as ever. Long-buried bombs can explode through hitting, jiggling, tossing, or burning. UXO accidents have killed and maimed more than fifty thousand people since the bombings began. Aside from soldiers, farmers account for the majority of victims.⁷

Lue Ha could no longer farm after the accident, so he and his family moved to the town of Phonsavanh. He now works as a masseur, and his wife buys food in the market across the street. Meanwhile, millions of Laotians

Above: A man holds his head in wonder as he stands in the crater made when a clearance team detonated a 750-pound bomb, in Phongsali Province, in northern Laos. A woman found the 40-year-old American bomb buried in the ground while clearing land for a new garden. The crater was more than 20 yards across and the explosion sent dirt and shrapnel flying a mile away. Left: A Vietnamese trader's family has dinner over a pile of bomb shrapnel, cluster bombs, and an artillery shell in their hut in Etoum. Vietnamese traders come to the area to buy scrap metal from locals who collect it in the surrounding fields and forest.

ABOVE: PHOTOGRAPH BY JERRY REDFERN © 2010. LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH BY JERRY REDFERN © 2006



continue to till unsafe soil in their perilous efforts to farm. Seemingly innocuous tasks carry inherent dangers in Laos—planting cassava, clearing brush, digging for worms. Even cooking fires occasionally explode when the heat ignites a buried bomb.⁸

Fear can eat at a person’s psyche. A simple home-cooked meal can become a daily nightmare. Su Phaeng, a farmer in the northernmost province of Phongsali, lost her husband to a UXO accident in 2009. The memory unnerves her stomach. “When I eat rice, I keep thinking about my husband, who was working to grow rice to feed the children,” she says. “Now the children eat the rice, but he can’t eat it.”⁹ ❷

NOTES

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1. Lowland Laotians typically eat sticky rice with every meal. It is served communally in large baskets or individually in small ones. *Laap* is a popular minced-meat salad heavy on herbs. *Or lam* is a popular spicy dish typically made with eggplant and pieces of *sa-khan*, the fragrant bark of pepper wood (*Piper ribesioides*).
2. Interview with Lue Ha in Phonsavan, Laos, 27 April 2010.
3. These facts are widely reported. See Legacies of War, <http://legaciesofwar.org/about-laos/secret-war-laos/>.
4. Ibid.



5. For bombing data and Google Earth maps, see the National Regulatory Authority for UXO/Mine Action Sector in Lao PDR at www.nra.gov.la/bombinginformation.html.

6. <http://legaciesofwar.org/about-laos/secret-war-laos/>.

7. National Regulatory Authority, "National Survey of UXO Victims and Accidents Phase 1," 42. See "Reports and Studies," www.nra.gov.la/resources.html.

8. This is not an uncommon story. Interviews with several villagers in Nakai Tai, Khammouane Province, 31 January 2008.

9. Interview with Su Phaeng in Sophoon, Phongsali Province, 15 March 2010.

Above: This boy was farming in his family's field when something exploded. He woke up in the Phonsavan hospital in northern Laos with wounds on his legs and groin, part of his jaw missing, and blind in one eye. This was his second trip to the hospital as his wounds had become re-infected. Left: A technician with a UXOLao bomb disposal team scans for bombs in a woman's yard as she continues weeding. They work along a new road built atop the old Ho Chi Minh Trail. People began building new homes in this spot before UXOLao had a chance to clear the area. Locals had lived with the bombs in the ground for so long that they were unconcerned by the technicians' warnings. The survey of the area eventually found dozens of cluster bombs and countless bits of shrapnel. UXOLao is the national bomb disposal outfit, with teams in every province. Even so, they have nowhere near enough people or money to meet the need for bomb clearance in Laos. In the meantime, many people live atop or near unexploded bombs, waiting for their safe removal.

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