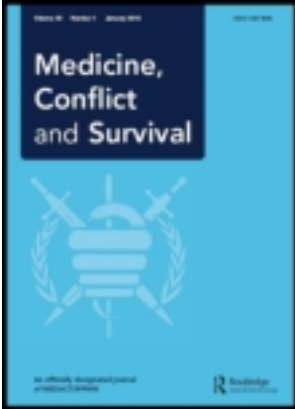


This article was downloaded by: [Mr Michael Pountney]

On: 16 November 2011, At: 06:42

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH,
UK



Medicine, Conflict and Survival

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fmcs20>

Laos: legacy of a secret

Steve Wright ^a

^a Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

Available online: 27 Sep 2011

To cite this article: Steve Wright (2011): Laos: legacy of a secret, *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, 27:2, 131-133

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13623699.2011.609759>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Laos: legacy of a secret, by Sean Sutton, Heaton Moor, Stockport, Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2011, 154 pp., £25 (hardback), ISBN 9-7819-0789-3018, available via <http://www.maginternational.org/news/on-sale-now-laos-legacy-of-a-secret-book/>

We rightly think of the 7 July 2007 attacks in London in which 52 people lost their lives as a terrorist atrocity. But our ability to imagine the human and bio-medical consequences would fail if that act was repeated over and over again, week in week out. In Laos between 1964 and 1973 that is exactly what happened. America secretly dropped two billion kilograms of ordnance on that country: a B52 load of bombs every six minutes, 24 hours a day for nine years. It was the heaviest aerial bombardment in history and the legacy of that secret war is still being felt.

In his new book, Mines Advisory Group's (MAG) award winning photographer, Sean Sutton documents what happened next. Since 1974, 20,000 people have been killed or injured in Laos from bombs or unexploded remnants of war. The official record shows that more than 270 million cluster munitions were dropped by the Americans and a third of them failed to explode. More than 40 years later they can and still do explode when children seeking valuable scrap pick them up or play with them. MAG is of course famous as a co-laureate of the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize but takes a practical role in removing this stuff by searching the land inch by inch. Its CEO, Lou McGrath has said 'Lao has been devastated by these deadly unexploded weapons for so many years, and now it needs the support of the international community, a genuine commitment to rid this country of this threat' ... 'We want to see that those governments who have signed this treaty can put their money where their mouth is and get the cluster munitions finally cleared from the land'.

MAG is well qualified to take this stance, since it was the first NGO to begin clearing unexploded ordnance from Laos, beginning in 1994. Laos is a crucible for learning about how war-ravaged communities have to adapt if they are to survive the peace. MAG's role in this process has been crucial in that it has worked alongside national authorities to clear huge areas of land in order for rural populations to return to their communities, grow crops and build new homes – often utilizing bomb casings as building materials.

But how can we glimpse what this process of surviving the peace actually means? In this beautifully illustrated account Sean Sutton answers with haunting photographs of a nation re-emerging from a devastating war.

He details, through insightful stories of survival, how specific families dealt with the fallout of such an unprecedented bombing campaign. We see kids being taught in classrooms held up with shell cases, teams of MAG community liaison staff explaining the hazards to local communities, teams



Source: Sean Sutton MAG, with permission.



Source: Sean Sutton MAG, with permission.

of locally trained staff methodically undertaking deep searches, kids playing with ordnance, local scrap merchants harvesting metal and often casualties. Sean explains how in the past:

... all the metal collected went to smelters in Vietnam but now factories have been built in Laos. It is very organized. The scrap collectors get \$1.50 for a kilo of iron, and \$2.50 for a kilo of aluminum. On average they find about seven kilos of metal a day ...

Villagers have developed their own way to 'low-order' a large bomb. This is a technique to blow the bomb apart without it exploding or 'high-ordering'. This is so that they can retrieve the iron from the bomb for its scrap value. They place a cluster bomb sub-munition, or bomblet, on some dry wood next to the bomb, light a fire and retreat. Not exactly safe, but less risky than what is happening now in Khammouane province. There are a number of construction projects going on in the area and companies are buying explosives to build roads. So there is now a market for these explosives and villagers are getting \$2.50 a kilo for it.

But it is not a safe career choice. He tells the story of 25-year-old Leng, blinded by a blast in the jungle:

Leng crawled out of the undergrowth to the roadside. He had managed to find his way up the mountainside through five kilometres of jungle. His two friends did not make it. Fifteen-year-old Ten and 30-year-old Talay were killed in the explosion. They were trying to chisel out the tail fuse on a 250 lb bomb. Talay had quite a reputation as an expert at this. Villagers said he had successfully done this dozens of times. He only needed to do four more and he would have enough money to pay for his wedding planned for the following month.

And yet the message from this powerfully documented book is one of hope and survival rather than despair. We see elephants dragging bombs out of paddy fields, daring teams of MAG women making safe 500lb bombs, reinstating life and community. We see above all else a massive war crime. Sean Sutton has done the world a massive service in this brilliant, sympathetic portrayal of a people dealing with the horrendous consequences of hi-tech bombing, in a form and format which everyone can understand in a glimpse.

Steve Wright
Leeds Metropolitan University, UK
S.T.Wright@leedsmet.ac.uk
© 2011, Steve Wright

TMT handbook. Triage, monitoring and treatment of people exposed to ionizing radiation following a malevolent act, edited by Carlos Rojas-Palma, Astrid Liland, Ane Naess Jerstad, George Etherington, Maria del Rosario Perez, Tua Rahola and Karen Smith, ISBN (PDF version) 978-82-90362-27-5, available free at <http://www.tmthandbook.org/>

Available as a free PDF download, this book is the result of a collaboration of several national and one commercial organization, funded by the