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Magnificent work

By Desmond Moynes

A convoy of two land cruisers, an ambulance and a large transport truck grinds to a dusty stop in front of the village headman's house in a remote commune in the central province of Quang Binh just as the sun starts rising over the sleepy hamlet. As the waking villagers gather round to watch, uniformed people spill out of the vehicles, unloading equipment and setting up tents.

Emblazoned on the vehicles and uniforms is a red and white skull and crossbones – the universal symbol for 'danger', along with the acronym MAG (standing for the UK based Mines Advisory Group). Although dressed and behaving with professional military precision, these Vietnamese employees of MAG are not part of any military group, rather they work for an international non-government organisation (NGO) that has been tasked with assisting the Vietnamese military to remove the threat posed by the remaining unexploded ordnance (UXO) left over from conflicts during the 1960s and 70s.

For Vietnamese citizens and foreign tourists visiting the bustling, thriving cities of Vietnam the legacy of the country's multiple conflicts have all been relegated to memories and museums, however, for a number of poorer marginalised communities in poor provinces, the legacy of unexploded bombs and mines still has a deadly impact.

According to the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, since 1975 it is estimated that over 100,000 people have been killed or injured by UXO and current annual casualty estimates are not known due to many deaths or injuries going unreported. Munitions failure rates are the cause of so much of the UXO left behind, and for some people this metal is a lucrative source of cash.

Scrap collecting is still a thriving industry in some parts of Vietnam and although it is illegal to harvest explosive material, many people take the risk to boost their family's income. One man in Quang Tri who wished to remain anonymous said he makes about 150,000 VND (nearly \$8.80) a week from this activity.

"If I didn't do this my family wouldn't survive – farming only allows me to grow enough rice to last us for eight months a year, so collecting scrap is the only thing I can do," he says. "I realise that the job is dangerous but I'm very careful when digging and reburial of any UXO I find."

However, some scrap collectors are less careful. In Me Village, Quang Binh there was an accident in January 2007 as one of the workers at the yard was cutting open a large bomb in order to remove the explosives so they could be sold. He died, along with three other people, in the resulting explosion.

Tran Thi Thu Hien is 30 years old and a mother of two. Her husband was killed instantly in the explosion as he drove his motorbike past the scrap yard and she is still angry with the scrap collectors: "My husband didn't even work at the yard, he was just passing by. Now my children have lost their father."

Tran Thi Tam's husband was the one who cut open the bomb. "He wasn't a scrap collector, but used to carry steel for the scrap yard," she said. "The owner wanted him to cut the bomb open with a chainsaw to remove the fuse and get the explosive. I told him not to do it because it was dangerous, but he still went ahead." The accident happened right outside her house, near the corner of her garden and the eldest of her three children was the first on



photo: Sean Surten



the scene and tried to help his father.

The memory of this is obviously still raw and tears fill her eyes as she continues. "He saw his father lying bleeding on the ground and knelt beside him, trying to push his intestines back into the wound. My son is still traumatised." The incomprehension is clear on her face. "If my husband dies of disease or age, it is normal. But he died because of the bomb."

The scrap yard was discovered to house more than 1,500 items of potentially lethal UXO, including projectiles, mortars, artillery shells and a large bomb.

Apart from the detectors and explosives used to destroy the UXO, the equipment MAG technicians use to clear ground could be found in any hardware store. Whipper snippers and secateurs are used to clear brush and shovels and trowels are used to expose any metal signal detected by the technicians. Work is sometimes slowed down by the amount of metal that is still left in the earth, with sometimes 1,000 pieces of scrap being uncovered per day. Since the end of the Vietnam War the Vietnamese military has been responsible for clearing the estimated 350,000 – 700,000 tonnes of UXO that is still lodged in Vietnam's soil, however in the late 1990s a number of international NGOs were given permission by the national government to start clearing land, conducting mine risk education and providing support to survivors.

MAG was one of the first organisations to start operations in Vietnam, and was tasked with clearing a 370 acre site which was the location of former US firebase in the central province of Quang Tri. During this first task MAG removed and destroyed over 2,000 land mines and

over 8,000 unexploded bombs, shells, grenades and mortars, and since then has been responsible for destroying almost 140,000 items of UXO and making almost 700 hectares of land safe to develop.

MAG's work is generally focused in poorer, rural communities, clearing villages of all reported UXO and clearing sites for community development projects such as schools, hospitals, resettlement areas, agricultural land etc. However, it is not just poor, rural villagers that are at risk of death or injury from UXO – large international corporations are also finding the threat of UXO is affecting their work on large projects, and insurance companies are also querying employee safety on uncleared sites.

MAG and the military's job are far from over due to the 15.5 million tonnes of naval-, air- and ground-fired ordnance in Indochina. Of this figure 12 million tonnes was used in South Vietnam alone. MAG's International Technical Operations Manager, Mark Russell, a 46-year-old ex-British Royal Navy diver, said the highly mobile and multi-skilled mine action team (MAT) is made up of 11 explosive ordnance disposal technicians and additional support staff including supervisors, drivers and medics.

"The team operating in this area is one of nine MATs that MAG has had operating in communes in Quang Tri and Quang Binh Provinces over the past decade," said Russell. "With over 200 national staff and five international staff, MAG is the largest NGO conducting humanitarian mine action activities in Vietnam."

Although a relatively simple and tedious process MAG has had an impact on the lives of many villagers in Quang Tri and Quang Binh Provinces. Staff have knocked on the doors of almost 200,000 houses and each village or piece of land the organisation clears just adds to the amount of land available for people to safely develop.

■ *MAG (Mines Advisory Group) is a neutral and impartial humanitarian organisation clearing the remnants of conflict for the benefit of communities worldwide. MAG is co-laureate of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize, awarded for its work with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), which culminated in the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty – the international agreement that bans anti-personnel landmines, sometimes referred to as the Ottawa Convention. For more information visit www.maginternational.org.*