

Pennies from Heaven

Notes from an American in Laos

Kurt Opprecht

The truck drivers who let me off here checked with me twice to make sure I understood that I was getting off in the middle of nowhere. It's actually only the edge of nowhere. There are maybe a full dozen shacks within a quarter mile. I got off here because I'm looking for what's left of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and this part of Route 9, just west of the Vietnam border, seems to be the closest you can get to it by road.

Roads and trails are especially important in this part of Laos. The U.S. dropped roughly one B-52 pay-load every eight minutes for nine years into the mountain forests around here¹. They were trying to shut down North Vietnam's supply route along the Ho Chi Minh Trail but they never succeeded in stopping traffic for more than a couple of days. (They did, however, earn Laos a place in world history as Most Bombed Nation.) Ten to thirty percent of the munitions failed to explode at the time and a good chunk of those left over are still more than eager to do their thing. Staying to the roads and paths is a good way to keep both your legs.

¹ According to the Mines Advisory Group(MAG), UK. (www.oneworld.org/mag/laos1.html)

As soon as I arrived, I hiked down the side road to the river and up along the trails around the rice paddies, looking out especially for what the Lao call “bombies,” live cluster bombs about the size of oranges. (You wouldn’t expect to find a bombie sitting out in the open after thirty years, but everyone once in a while someone does.) The countryside is wooded tropical mountains, full of the sounds of the jungle. It’s frustrating not to be able to break away and explore, but just sitting down and listening is an adventure.

Laos is a poor country that makes other poor countries look rich. The people who survived in the eastern mountains hunt and farm and raise a little extra money collecting the bombs, pieces of planes, and fragments of bombs that fell during what was called the “secret war.” They drag the pieces for miles through the forests and along dirt roads to Highway 9 where shopkeepers give them as much as two cents a pound for it.

Remnants of the Ho Chi Minh Trail are all around me. From where I sit and eat my rice and fish I can see some. The bigger pile is behind the shop, but there is some lying in front by the side of the road. Maybe these pieces were too big to be dragged around back, or maybe the shop keeper just hasn’t gotten around to moving them.

One of the pieces is just sheet metal. It looks like it might have been part of a plane or the fender of a long truck, and it makes me wonder if this is a clue to one of the infamous MIAs. Maybe there’s a serial number on it that would be valuable information to a family on the other side of the globe. The fender-looking piece is resting on an unexploded bomb about the size of a scuba tank.

When I first got off the truck, it didn't look like there would be any commerce at all here, but what was I thinking? There's a paved road; the supply line is open. Besides this rice and fish, I can get flashlight batteries, needles and thread, aspirins, bottled water, lots of things. I could probably buy an old bomb, even.

I like coming to places like this and being deprived of the luxuries of life in Manhattan. I like it the way I like camping. It's a challenge. After a month or two of this kind of traveling, though, it starts to get old and I start to think a little more in the frame of mind of the people I'm visiting. I realize it's not like camping for them. Through their eyes I can see how luxurious my job in Midtown at \$18.00 an hour is. It also makes me appreciate this rice and this fish. It's almost the only thing to eat here, and if these people weren't here to feed it to me, I'd be really hungry. I'm at the mercy of people who can't understand a word I say.

Funny thing about being so close to a bomb, it just doesn't look dangerous. Not the way a sharp knife or a snarling Doberman or a gaping crevice does. I feel like a hapless victim of Daffy Duck's, like the plumber who gets handed the lit bomb instead of the wrench. He sits and looks at it for a while as the fuse burns down. It's clearly a bomb, but that idea doesn't sink in at first, it's too strange. "Hm, I was expecting a wrench and this isn't a wrench, it's . . . a bomb!"

I sit here and eat my rice and look at this bomb as though it were just a scuba tank. Every once in a while a voice in the back of my head gets loud enough to make me notice, "Bomb! Bomb! Alarm. Alarm. Run! That's what they do on TV!" But the cartoon

examples aren't compelling enough. I'd rather sit here and eat. Besides, the bomb isn't ticking. There's no lit fuse on it like the ones Bugs Bunny has. I'm not even sure it still can explode.

There's a little kid, about three years old over by the bomb, and a chicken. I want to go take the child away from here. Someplace safe, about a mile away. But of course I can't do that. Even if I could walk away with a Lao child, I'd be afraid I'd walk him right into another, less obvious bomb somewhere else. I just hope he doesn't pick up a rock and toss it at the thing. That would be perfect, wouldn't it? The bomb survives a fall from an airplane, and a three-year old sets it off.²

How many times have those cartoon bombs gone off in North American homes, blackening the cat or the dog or the rabbit, stunning him for a full second before he shakes it off and gets back into the chase? Billions, no doubt. Estimates are that two million tons of real bombs fell on Laos. Not even one for every thousand that have exploded since on American TV screens.

This is a country that apparently has only one swimming pool. Building a bridge is a big deal. To the Hmong mountain tribes, the eight-year barrage must have been beyond surreal. I can't imagine how they assigned meaning to jet fighters and exploding metal falling from the sky. And I hesitate to mention that I can't help but imagine some of the people around here might be grateful, in some remote and twisted way, for their special

² According to a survey conducted by the Mennonite Central Committee and the Mines Advisory Group, children make up almost half of unexploded bomb victims. (www.crm.mb.ca/mcc/acp/1995/9/laos.html)

metal cash crop. They'd be envious, no doubt, to hear that even the most destitute in America get five cents for a single empty beer can, and even full beer cans rarely explode.

I'm upset if the 6 train runs five minutes late. I'm angry because I got a summons for drinking Veuve Cliquot on St. Mark's place. On the same planet where you can pay two hundred and fifty dollars to have an evening gown dry-cleaned, there are people dragging bombs through the woods for two cents a pound.

And I'm kind of embarrassed, I want to say, telling you that I'm sitting here staring at this bomb. If someone reported something like this in America, they'd evacuate a perimeter a mile wide. But I'm just staring at it, wondering how big an explosion there would be if it were to go off. Would there be nothing left but a crater? Or would I just be maimed and return to the U.S. with a few parts missing?

It would be easy to say that the developed nations' level of complacency is a sleeping bomb like that one right there, next to the chicken. But I really don't think this bomb is going to go off. I'm just going to sit here and eat my rice and fish. And the people of Laos will go on digging up bombs. A month from now, I'll be sitting in front of my computer screen somewhere clean and air-conditioned in a place only slightly more real than the pastel cat-and-mouse living room I've watched my whole life on TV. And this part of Laos won't seem so disturbing anymore.

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possible photo caption

It's not easy for ordinance awareness programs in Laos to overcome the familiarity that comes from living with military debris for 25 years, to bring home the point that some of these items simply should not be touched.

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