

FEATURE

The Secret War in Laos

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

From 1964 to 1973, the U.S. dropped more than two million tons of ordnance on Laos during 580,000 bombing missions—equal to a planeload of bombs every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for 9 years – making Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history. The bombings were part of the U.S. Secret War in Laos to support the Royal Lao Government against the Pathet Lao and to interdict traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The bombings destroyed many villages and displaced

hundreds of thousands of Lao civilians during the nine-year period.

Up to a third of the bombs dropped did not explode, leaving Laos contaminated with vast quantities of unexploded ordnance (UXO). Over 20,000 people have been killed or injured by UXO in Laos since the bombing ceased. The wounds of war are not only felt in Laos. When the Americans withdrew from Laos in 1973, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled the country, and many of them ultimately resettled in the United States.

MAP OF U.S. HISTORICAL RECORDS 1965-1975



Regions in Laos that were bombed are highlighted in black.

The *mission* of Legacies of War is to raise awareness about the *history* of the Vietnam War-era bombing in Laos and advocate for the clearance of unexploded bombs, to provide space for *healing* the wounds of war, and to create greater *hope* for a future of peace.

According to the Legacies of War project, “from 1964 to 1973, the U.S. dropped more than two million tons of ordnance [another word for “explosives”] on Laos during 580,000 bombing missions—equal to a planeload of bombs every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for 9 years - making Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history.”

Here are some other startling facts about the U.S. bombing of Laos and its tragic aftermath:

- Over 270 million cluster bombs were dropped on Laos during the Vietnam War (210 million more bombs than were dropped on Iraq in 1991, 1998 and 2006 combined); up to 80 million did not detonate.
- Nearly 40 years on, less than 1% of these munitions have been destroyed. More than half of all confirmed cluster munitions casualties in the world have occurred in Laos.
- Each year there are now just under 50 new casualties in Laos, down from 310 in 2008. Close to 60% of the accidents result in death, and 40% of the victims are children.
- Between 1993 and 2016, the U.S. contributed on average \$4.9M per year for UXO clearance in Laos; the U.S. spent \$13.3M per day (in 2013 dollars) for nine years bombing Laos.
- In just ten days of bombing Laos, the U.S. spent \$130M (in 2013 dollars), or more than it has spent in clean up over the past 24 years (\$118M).

The Vietnam War ran for nearly twenty years, from late 1955 until the spring of 1975. While most of the fighting occurred in Vietnam, other nations – most notably Cambodia and Laos – were also part of the theater of war. Laos, in particular, was the scene of an intense bombing campaign by the U.S. military; the U.S. was hoping to disrupt the Viet Cong supply lines while simultaneously supporting the Laotian monarchy against communist rebels.

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Today, some of those bombs are the basis for potentially lucrative but very dangerous employment in the area.

Many Laotians have very agrarian lives, living on the equivalent of a few dollars (as little as \$2) a day earned by growing rice. Even simple tools are hard to come by in part because the metal needed to make them is relatively expensive at about 5 cents per pound. On the flip side, finding a large piece of metal can be a major economic boon. Per NPR, a 2,000 pound haul can warrant a \$100 payday, and those amounts are more common than you’d think, because bomb casings from leftover U.S. ordnance weigh about that much. It is therefore unsurprising that many in Laos scavenge for the metal from leftover bombs

The good news is that the U.S. military dropped an estimated 270 million bombs during the war, so there is a lot of scrap to be found. This has had a huge impact on the economy. As Global Post reported in 2010, “villagers turn scrap into tools and utensils – everything from bowls to buckets, boats, spoons, knives, hoes, troughs, ladders, planters, cowbells, stilts and pedestals for satellite dishes.”

The bad news – the very bad news – is that approximately 30% of those bombs failed to explode at the time they were dropped, and are therefore potentially live. Called UXO – “unexploded ordnance” – these cluster bombs are liable to go off if disturbed.

The cluster bombs are responsible for approximately 20,000 deaths and injuries to date. Many farmers working in the fields on their crops – not looking for metal – often run into a hidden UXO with terrible results. And many others are injured while explicitly looking for and handling UXO, hoping to cash out.

Education is a large part of the efforts to stem the tide of these accidents. Children educate one another on the dangers of picking up scrap metal via puppet shows and songs, with lyrics of warning...“Be careful before you go out and play. if you see a bombie do not touch it,”. Unfortunately, the economic allure of striking pay dirt is often too difficult – and too necessary – to avoid, so UXO collection continues.

There’s an international effort underway to help, but its effectiveness is mixed. In 2008, many nations entered into the Convention on Cluster Munitions, an agreement to not only stop the use of cluster bombs (starting in 2010), but also to rehabilitate those areas affected by bombings from generations past. Unfortunately, the process is slow-going and requires more funding. As of 2014, the United States is donating \$12 million annually to the efforts, a significant increase over previous years’ amounts but still much less than needed (and much less than the cost to bomb Laos in the first place). The New York Times estimated that the world will be donating a total of \$40 million toward UXO removal in Laos in 2015, but also estimates that “it will be decades before all the unexploded bombs are removed from the Laotian countryside.”