

Laotian Lives Matter: Unexploded Ordnance Left Over from the Indochina War

By [Jeremy Kuzmarov](#)

Global Research, December 06, 2021

[CovertAction Magazine](#) 4 December 2021

Region: [Asia](#)
Theme: [History](#)

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the “Translate Website” drop down menu on the top banner of our home page (Desktop version).

To receive Global Research’s Daily Newsletter (selected articles), [click here](#).

Visit and follow us on Instagram at [@crg_globalresearch](#).

*Laotians continue to be crippled and maimed by **unexploded ordnance left over from the Indochina War**.*

Because of the world’s indifference, only one percent of 80 million undetonated antipersonnel bombs have been cleared.

On a bright Saturday morning, August 2, 2008, Yae Li, a middle-aged rice farmer with six children, was hoeing his rice fields as usual in Xieng Khouang, Laos, on the Plain of Jars when all of a sudden his life was changed forever.

Yae’s hoe struck an undetonated ordnance lodged in the ground, a remnant from the U.S. secret war in Laos lasting from 1964 to 1975.

The bombie exploded and Yae’s body flew backwards. He lost both of his feet, parts of his legs and a hand; at the time he thought he would die.

BOMBIES



BLU 26 B
Diam 64mm



BLU 3 B
Height 107mm
Diam 69mm



BLU 24 B
Height 94mm
Diam 64mm



Source: legaciesofwar.org

After his recovery he and his family suffered greatly. Yae could no longer farm his land and his eldest son had to drop out of school to help feed the family. With money tight, the other kids sometimes lacked food, and it was hard to pay for school fees. Yae himself became depressed and lost his purpose in life, asking why he had to “endure this suffering.”

Eventually his fortunes changed when an NGO raised funds to buy him a tractor and help him establish a store in town, though life for him and his family remains very difficult.

Waiting to Explode

Yae’s story is told in a new documentary film, [Waiting to Explode: Forgotten Bombs of a Secret War](#).

Director Shuja Paul said that he made the film in an attempt to [bring international attention to the deadly humanitarian crisis in Laos](#).

The United States dropped more ordnance on Laos during the Indochina War than it did on Germany and Japan during World War II.

The purpose of the bombing was to cut off North Vietnamese communist supply routes to South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh trail and terrorize villagers in northern Laos who were supporting the pro-Communist Pathet Lao.

The latter had led the liberation war against France and won elections in 1958 that were

sabotaged by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which created a private army among the indigenous Hmong people to fight the Pathet Lao—backed up by the massive bombing.



CIA paramilitary specialist training Hmong tribesmen to fight the Pathet Lao. [Source: readex.com]

The majority of the bombs that the U.S. Air Force dropped were cluster bombs—manufactured by Honeywell Corporation of Minnesota—that were not designed to destroy tanks but human beings.

Some 35,000 Laotians were reported to have been killed during the war, and another 20,000 after from unexploded ordnance which remained buried in rice paddies and fields.

In the last 45 years, [only one percent of the undetonated ordnance from the war has been cleared](#)—owing largely to public indifference.

The Obama administration pledged [\\$90 million over three years](#) to help clear the ordnance—[nearly the same amount that had been given over the previous 20 years](#)—which is not nearly enough. [At least 79 million bombs remain uncleared and waiting to go off.](#)

Voices from the Plain of Jars

Waiting to Explode includes an interview with Fred Branfman, a U.S. aid worker who helped expose the secret bombing of Laos before the U.S. public in the early 1970s.

Branfman was a hippie adventurer who had come to love the Laotian people after working as an educational adviser in the country beginning in the late 1960s.

He especially admired how the priorities and values of the Laotians were different from most Americans—they had few material possessions but respected and loved nature and treasured time spent with friends and family.

After discovering that the U.S. was secretly bombing the northern part of the country,

Branfman recorded the testimony of villagers who had to survive the attacks hiding in caves, often coming out at night to farm their fields.



Drawing of Laotian villager. [Source: zinnproject.org]

Many lost loved ones and had to leave their villages which were destroyed. Branfman interviewed kids struck by napalm and who were blinded and maimed by the bombs and traumatized.



Drawing of Laotian villager. [Source: lisanowlain.com]

Infiltrating the U.S. Air Force base in Thailand where the bombings were carried out, Branfman found the businesslike atmosphere eerie. The attacks, he uncovered, were carried out because U.S. pilots had run out of targets in North Vietnam. Monteagle Stearns, deputy chief of mission in Laos from 1969 to 1972 told Congress: "We had all those planes sitting around and couldn't just let them stay there with nothing to do."

In 1971, Branfman tried to alert the U.S. public that major war crimes were taking place by

testifying before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and a year later published the book *Voices from the Plain of Jars*, which recorded the experiences of Laotian refugees whom he had interviewed.

Decades later when Branfman returned to the Plain of Jars, he was struck by how many people from the region were still adversely impacted by the bombing. One man, for example, said he had ten water buffalo when he had 100 prior to the Indochina War.

Terrible Human Costs of War

Besides Yae Li, *Waiting to Explode* spotlights the suffering of numerous other victims of the U.S. secret war in Laos. One of them, Chongcher Vue, lost his young son Mai and two nephews when Mai was playing with his friends and picked up an undetonated bomb that exploded.

Another boy, Ka Ying, who was only two at the time, lost his vision and many of his teeth, and had his face deformed, when he was playing in the dirt near his house and picked up a bomb that exploded in his face.

With the help of an NGO, Ka Ying's family was able after some years to get him medical attention in Thailand, and he is currently doing okay in a school for the blind.

His grandmother, who helped raise the boy, cried every day for months after the accident.

This and other heart-wrenching stories remind us of the terrible human costs of the U.S. war in Indochina—which the public remains largely oblivious to.

*

Note to readers: Please click the share buttons above or below. Follow us on Instagram, @crg_globalresearch. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Jeremy Kuzmarov is Managing Editor of *CovertAction Magazine*. He is the author of four books on U.S. foreign policy, including *Obama's Unending Wars* (Clarity Press, 2019) and *The Russians Are Coming, Again*, with John Marciano (Monthly Review Press, 2018). He can be reached at: jkuzmarov2@gmail.com.

Featured image: Undetonated ordnance piled up. [Source: nwasianweekly.com]

The original source of this article is [CovertAction Magazine](#)
Copyright © [Jeremy Kuzmarov](#), [CovertAction Magazine](#), 2021

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Jeremy](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca