



Scott Beveridge

Scott Beveridge has worked as a writer/photographer at the *Observer-Reporter*, Washington, Pa., for the past 19 years. Beveridge, 48, was named environment editor at the daily newspaper in 2002 to manage the controversial longwall coal mining beat. He is a 1978 graduate of Indiana University of Pennsylvania and will graduate in December with a master's degree in liberal studies from Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Bombs still hazard to life in Vietnam

Local veterans respond with medical help and more

by Scott Beveridge
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DANANG, Vietnam—The eight boys playing in a pile of dirt had no idea they discovered something packed with enough explosives to kill them.

Ten-year-old Huynh Thanh Tung was fortunate to survive when the tiny war relic burst into a ball of flames and flying metal as he stuffed it into a bottle. Huynh's playmates managed to escape with less severe burns.

"He's lucky," said Huynh's physician, Dr. Do Van Hung, on the day the boy underwent skin graft surgery to repair his right leg, skinned to the bone below the knee by the bomb. In most cases, children die when they stumble upon these types of unexploded ordnance, the legacy of the Vietnam War, Do said.

The Vietnamese government estimates 1,100 people die and 1,882 are injured each year by the warheads, grenades, mortar shells and bomb fragments. Nearly half of these types of accidents happen while people are fishing, plowing new fields or clearing land. The explosives are

scattered across each of the country's 61 provinces, lurking under a few inches of top soil or in rice paddies, lakes, rivers and streams.

Five men were injured, two seriously, when they tried to break open a "shell left over from the U.S. war in order to sell its metal," the *Viet Nam News*, the nation's English language daily newspaper, reported July 21.

The problem is most severe in the central provinces in an area once known as the demilitarized zone. The DMZ was created as a safe, military-free zone at the end of Vietnam's war with France in 1954, when the Vietnamese were supposed to work toward electing a president.

During the ensuing war with America, however, the DMZ was nearly stripped of its vegetation by chemical warfare and U.S. bombing attacks that were occurring almost daily by 1972.

Today, the Vietnamese consider the old bombs and the havoc they wreak part of

the national tragedy.

Relief agency Clear Path International investigated 113 new accidents involving these weapons between January and June 30, said Hugh Hosman, the agency's director in Vietnam.

Small explosives called bomblets or bombies are responsible for many of these types of accidents, said Hosman, 42, a native of Yakima, Wash. The size of a tennis ball, 660 of them were stuffed inside a larger shell and set by timers to explode at various stages during bombing raids. Estimates suggest, however, that as many as 1 in 6 of the bomblets did not explode as designed, he said.

Clear Path is the only nongovernmental agency in Vietnam that provides direct medical care and support to such victims. Its work, though, often is thwarted by red tape delays in the developing Communist country.

Westerners do not have freedom of movement in Vietnam's poor, rural villages. Arrangements must be made three

days in advance to visit these victims to allow time for the government to conduct background checks on the missionaries. A military official also must accompany them to the homes.

“They are worried an outside influence will try to topple the government,” said Hosman, whose agency made arrangements to pay for Huynh’s medical care in late July.

The June 25 accident at a home construction site in the ramshackle Danang village of Hoa Hai occurred a week before members of a Washington County Vietnam veterans group returned to Central Vietnam. Known as the Friends of Danang of McMurray, the nonprofit organization has been raising money since 1998 to minister to young victims of unexploded ordnance and other children living in poverty.

“What can we do to help?” said Thanh Armagost of Reynoldsville, eager to help speed Huynh’s recovery. A Vietnamese immigrant, she has made three trips to her homeland this year as a tireless volunteer for the Friends of Danang.

Armagost made sure Huynh’s case was forwarded to her group’s partner in

Danang, World Vision International. The Christian relief and development organization, with financial support from the Friends of Danang, has been providing surgery and assistance to poor families.

World Vision’s staff later provided Huynh and his injured friends with vitamins, food, clothing and money.

The explosion also sheared the thumb and index finger from Huynh’s right hand, shattered bones in his left leg and burned both hands and legs.

“Metal pieces entered the soft tissue,” said Huynh’s physician at Danang General Hospital. “We had to remove many, many pieces on the hands.”

The physician discussed the surgery while the boy was recovering July 7 in a small hospital room with white-tiled walls beside beds holding three other patients. An 8-inch, green desk fan blew warm air across the boy’s naked body, while a bright-orange hand towel collected sweat from his brow. The temperature approached 100 degrees during a tropical heat wave that left Vietnam feeling and smelling like a sauna bath.

Huynh is especially small and thin for his age because he also suffers from heart

disease and a poor diet, relief workers said. The type of bomb that injured him remains a mystery as the government continues its investigation into the accident.

“Staggering, really, the rate of morbidity and mortality given the amount of time that has passed,” said Hosman, discussing this legacy of the Vietnam War, three decades after it ended.

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