

Xieng Khouang, Laos: the smoke marks the spot where disposal teams are hard at work, detonating four unexploded bombs. Below: members of UCT6, the all-female bomb clearance unit



The Vietnam war left Laos, per capita, the most heavily bombed country in history – and unexploded ordnance is still injuring and killing its people. Photographer [Tessa Bunney](#) travelled to one of the worst-affected areas to see the land being cleared, and met an extraordinary bomb disposal team, made up entirely of women

THE WOMEN OF UCT6





Pheng

Pheng, 39, is one of UCT6's technicians. After her husband was killed by UXO she struggled to support her five children, labouring in paddy fields and weaving at home. The Mines Advisory Group's (Mag) policy is to train up the poorest members of a community as technicians

Manixia Thor

As deputy team leader of UCT6, 25-year-old Thor is responsible for monitoring the team on site. She met her husband, Long Vang, through her Mag work



During the Vietnam war, the US dropped more than 270 million cluster munitions over Laos. Many of these "bombies", as they are known locally, failed to detonate and remained on the ground as death traps. The last bomb fell on Laos in 1973, but at least 20,000 people have been killed or injured since by unexploded ordnance (UXO) and the country remains the most heavily bombed, per capita, in history.

In November I went to Xieng Khouang, one of the most contaminated provinces, where death and injury from UXO is part of everyday life. I was there to document the work of UCT6, an all-female UXO clearance team and one of seven in the province working for the Mines Advisory Group (Mag), a humanitarian organisation clearing the remnants of conflict worldwide.

The women of UCT6 know all too well the sudden tragedies that UXO can unleash. One of them, Pheng, lost her husband when he stepped on a bomb while foraging for food; she was left with five children. Meanwhile her team mate Bouakham Bounmavilay farms on family land that has not yet been cleared: "We don't have another place to grow rice," she explains.

Each day, these women do a dangerous "male" job in a country where females traditionally stay at home; the team was specially created to offer

Bouakham Bounmavilay

has worked as a UCT6 technician for a year. A widow with four children, Bounmavilay, 48, says the Mag work is far less dangerous than farming her own uncleared land

Sidavone Sipaseuth

The leader of UCT4, one of the area's six other Mag teams, Sipaseuth, 36, is training for Explosive Ordnance Disposal Level 4. She will be the first Lao woman at Mag to reach that level when her course finishes in May



women a chance to work together. They head out into the field armed with metal detectors. When the signal goes off, the technician digs down and assesses whether it's UXO or merely scrap metal. Demolitions occur at the end of each day; teams work three weeks in a row, then rest for one.

As a group, these women often talk about the same issues that working mothers struggle with in the west: childcare and work-life balance. Yet doing such a responsible job has raised the women's status in the communities they come from. They are earning salaries, often for the first time in their lives, and are inspiring role models for younger generations of women in Laos.

From 2004 to June 2012 Mag cleared more than 38.7 million sq m of suspect land in Laos, destroying 161,802 items of UXO. As a result, more than 450,000 people gained land that is safe to walk, play and work on. The UCT6 women feel a huge responsibility to help clear the land for future generations. "If we don't discover any UXO we feel disappointed," says Manixia Thor, deputy team leader. "Last week we were able to detect a 500lb bomb, so we were delighted." ▶

Additional reporting by Rebecca Harley. For further information on Mag's work in Laos, go to www.maginternational.org/laopdr. For a slideshow of more images, go to www.ft.com/laosbombs; to comment, please email magazineletters@ft.com





Looking for “bombies”: there are distinct phases to this dangerous process. Initially, as Bouakham shows above, a site must be cleared of vegetation; then scanned with a metal detector; and, if the signal goes off, the technician (Pheng) digs to investigate further



What lies beneath: examples of typical items excavated by Mag in Xieng Khouang include (from top) a rocket; a Blu-26 “bombie”; a cartridge casing, used to house propellant; a hand grenade; a Blu-3 “bombie”; a mortar; a 81mm HE Frag; a 20lb bomb



The camp Mag provides a camp for each team so that members can stay together during their three weeks on site (although those living nearby can ask to go home in the evening). At present, UCT6 live in this rented house in Ban Namoune village, where they are currently working

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