

FIELD NOTES FROM VIETNAM

Frank Lenik, PLS



February 20th - 23rd

I arrived safely in Hanoi, Vietnam, and spent the weekend adjusting to time change and climate change. I also tried to get to know a bit more about the Vietnamese people and their culture. The Vietnamese Lunar New Year, Tet, was on February 14th. This holiday lasts for a whole week and was just ending when I arrived.

On Monday, February 22nd, after a good rest in the Queen of Hearts Hotel, I went to the Representative Office of the Mines Advisory Group, MAG, in Hanoi and met with Jimmie Roodt, Country Program Manager, and Tony Fernandes, Technical Operations Manager for Vietnam. They briefed me on MAG's work in

Vietnam to free land from mines and unexploded ordnance, UXO, for agriculture and community development. We made arrangements for me to travel to Dong Hoi and visit MAG project sites in Quang Binh Province.

Just for background, MAG's field operations are carried out in two stages by Community Liaison and Technical Teams. The Community Liaison Teams meet with local officials and individuals and record information about suspected or known UXO or land mine areas. Armed with this information, the Technical Teams examine and clean up the suspected sites as necessary. Once a site is declared free of mines or UXOs, the Community Liaison Team returns for post clearance assessment.



February 24th

Today, the education which I came to Vietnam for began in earnest. A Mine Action Team had a mine clearing project in the Son Tung area in Quang Binh, and I went to observe them in action. In the afternoon, I shadowed the Community Liaison Team in Bo Trach.

The MAG liaison team was in Bo Trach because community leaders asked for assistance in clearing unexploded ordnance in the area. The town of Bo Trach has 207 homes and a population of about 1022 inhabitants; most of the people I met are farmers.

The work always starts with data collection. The Community Liaison Team whom I accompanied went from door to door interviewing residents about "danger areas." We were given specific locations of unexploded ordnance that residents knew or heard about. People claimed there is a large bomb in Bo Trach; others pointed to the existence of cluster munitions. We also heard a story about children playing with a bomblet and getting killed.

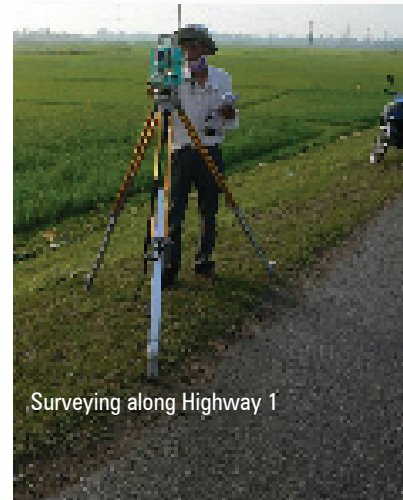




Household survey



Two surveyors on National Highway 1 in Quang Binh Province



Surveying along Highway 1

The team drew a map of Bo Trach and its surroundings and marked all the locations they were told about. They also marked the ground with paint so that the Mine Action Team would know where the unexploded ordnance is likely to be.

The Mine Action Team which I followed was working in Son Tung, a village where 448 people live in 117 homes. This village had been visited two weeks ago by the Community Liason Team. The team had identified twenty five possible “danger areas” in the village.

The work of the deminers is fraught with great danger and requires much bravery—just like that of firemen. Because of the risky nature of their work, the safety of the deminers is always a priority. I was given a complete run down of the safety procedures the team follows, including a tour of their control point at the command post, and their medical and evacuation team plans. All these safeguards are in place before a mine detector gets carried out of a truck.

The mine detection teams are teams of two guys working in a buddy system—one man is working while the other is watching over him. In Son Tung, the teams of deminers were using two types of mine locators—the Schonstedt, which were purchased with contributions

from the National Society of Professional Surveyors, and another type called the Ebbinger 420.

Demining is a slow process, which can take a very long time, perhaps because the work has to be done extremely carefully and, safely. The team I was with used the Schonstedt detector in the high vegetation in order to pin point the location of the unexploded ordnance. Then they used clippers or a machete to clear the brush from the area identified by the detector as a danger area. They then used the Ebbinger 420 for a second sweep of the area intended to actually locate the ordnance. After excavating the device, the deminers determined which type of an explosive it is and what risks it poses.

If the unexploded ordnance is benign, it may be transported to a government facility for mass detonation at a later date. If, however, it is volatile, it is blown up in situ using explosive charges.

I hope that this gives you some idea about what these people are up against. I am going to visit more sites tomorrow and will continue this thread.

February 25th

Another day with the MAG Vietnam group today! We left Dong Hoi early in the morning and drove south to Ang Son, site of a Buddhist temple



Searching for a subsurface UXO

destroyed during the war. There is a huge bronze bowl at the site which had only recently been returned from Ho Chi Minh City. The monks raised money to rebuild their temple, but before the land could once again be used for construction, MAG had to be called in to check the area for unexploded ordnance. By the time I visited Ang Song, the site had been cleared, and the foundation was clearly visible. The MAG team dug a foot-and-a-half of earth, then did some detecting, and continued in this fashion until they reached six feet below ground. The site is safe and under construction.

South of Ang Song in My Thui, the need is eerily the same—to clear land for redevelopment as a community center with athletic fields. The site selected for this project was a military camp during the war and was heavily bombed. MAG used three types of mine detectors in My Thui: a “magic carpet,” which is a large detector

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Go to www.maginternational.org.



Remnants of a 500 lb MK82 bomb recovered in Quang Binh and displayed at the MAG's offices in Dong Hoi City

pushed by a tractor, a large loop detector, and a small loop detector. I watched as the team worked their way down rows defined by yellow rope, each maintaining a 25-meter distance from the other in case of an accident. They removed a lot of metal while I was watching, including a cluster bomb, mortar, and a 37-mm projectile. As in Ang Song, the area where the foundation of the proposed community center will be built was given a thorough examination to ensure the safety of the construction workers.

I met many Vietnamese on my travels so far and have really enjoyed their company. They are curious, of course, but also extremely friendly.

I am in Hue tonight and have internet issues. There are no accompanying photos as yet but I will try to send some later. Tomorrow, I will travel to Ho Chi Minh City to meet up with Cycle Challenge folks.

February 26th

One thing I had not realized before I started planning this trip was how long Vietnam is. Check your atlases or Google Earth, but I think it is more than 1200 miles long. This creates quite a variation in climate. When I was in Hanoi, the temperatures were in the 50s. When I got up in Hue today, it was about 90° C.

If you read travel guides, you'll notice that those for Vietnam have a special section on how to cross streets. This seems like a no brainer, but it is not that simple in Vietnam. The most common vehicle here is the motor bike. There are also many bicycles on the streets, as well as some cars and trucks. All vehicles proceed down the roads with seeming abandon, and pedestrians must wade into the traffic without flinching. Somehow, like a river



Fishing on the Nhat Le River which empties into the South China Sea in Dong Hoi

around a rock, the traffic passes around you and you arrive at the other side. Don't stop though, this breaks the spell and you can get run down.

Driving itself is an adventurous phenomenon in Vietnam. The most important part on a car or motor bike is the horn. No brakes? No problem. No muffler? No problem. No horn? Go get it in the shop, without delay. Although the noise is raucous, it's not without a purpose: it notifies the drivers of one another's position and intentions. The centerline is there to identify the middle of the road, but cars often cross it, and even drive down the "wrong" side of the road. This is all o.k. and, in fact, normal. Just don't stop, or you'll break the spell.

My next stop is Da Nang. It took about two hours to reach our destination. The speedometer showed we were traveling less than 50 km (or about 30 miles) per hour. We travelled slowly but arrived safely. Much time is spent in Vietnam travelling. It's hard to know where the time goes until you take this into account.

From Da Nang, I headed to Ho Chi Ming. Arrived late this afternoon, and with just a little time left before dark, I decided to visit the War Remnants Museum. Saw on display a collection of tanks, helicopters, airplanes, and weaponry used during the conflict. The profusion of photos and artifacts left over from the conflict is staggering. Their message is very moving.

Hope all is well back home,
Frank Lenik, PLS
NSPS governor from New Jersey