



Above the Fray: Traditional Hilltribe Art Newsletter

Spring, 2009

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Number 4
www.hilltribeart.com

Our Unexploded Bombs: Laos' Modern Crisis

Join Us on Sunday, May 3, at 7 PM

One of the most attractive qualities of modern Laos for "backpack" travelers is the sparseness of western development and tourist amenities. This attraction, however, is dulled by the realization that unexploded ordnance (UXOs), and the poverty it engenders, is a key reason for this lack of development.

Between 1964 and 1973 the US waged an undeclared "Secret War" against Laos in an effort to eliminate the supply routes that fed Communist Vietnam with soldiers and weapons. The US dropped more bombs on Laos than have been dropped on any other country in all history – *over 3 million tons, or about 1000 lbs. per man, woman, and child in Laos.*

Many were "cluster bombs." These coffin-sized shells open up a few hundred feet over the ground to disperse up to 700 explosive "bombies" which "carpet bomb" about two acres.

Laos' modern crisis stems with the fact that up to 40% of these fist-sized bombies did not explode upon impact, and now sit in the soil or lay wedged in a bamboo grove waiting to be disrupted - perhaps by a farmer's plow, a builder's shovel, or a child's curiosity. *Some 30,000,000 unexploded bombies are believed to litter the soil of Laos.* And some 40 years after the bombs have stopped dropping, these UXOs kill or maim over 200 people each year, half of whom are children. These bombies will continue to be "viable" – potentially explosive - for 300 years.



The boys with cluster bomb casings in Laos.

"Above the Fray" Events:

**Our Unexploded Bombs:
Laos' Modern Crisis**
Presentation plus PBS' "Bombies" Documentary
Sunday, May 3rd, 7-9 PM, Free
at Spencer Creek Grange*

Donations accepted for Mines Advisory Group. www.maginternational.org

Mother's Day Weekend Sale of Silk
(and other unexpectedly intriguing items)

Saturday and Sunday, May 9 and 10
11 AM - 5 PM

at Spencer Creek Grange*

*3 miles west of Chambers on Lorane Hwy @ MacBeth

We are also available for private showings by app't.

Aside from the obvious danger to the general population, this crisis also forces Laos to remain under-developed and impoverished. Farmers cannot expand their rice fields without risking their lives and the lives of their stock. Any development, such as building roads, schools, homes, or businesses, runs the risk of hitting a UXO and endangering the people (and machinery) on site. Any potential tourist "hot-spot," which can provide a clean, safe route to stimulate local jobs and a variety of industries, must be searched inch-by-inch with metal detectors to be assured it is safe, an expensive task which can take weeks per acre. Some tourist sites we visited had only cleared a meter-wide path, marked with painted rocks, to indicate where it is surely safe to walk. But over 99%, of Laos, from schoolyards to farmer's fields to the jungle that borders every village to the villages themselves, has not been surely cleared.

Please join us on **Sunday, May 3rd** for a presentation regarding the problem of UXOs in Laos, and the route to solutions. We will show slides of our relevant travel experiences and a PBS documentary, "Bombies." We will also, we hope, raise a few dollars for Mines Advisory Group (Laos), the 1997 Nobel-Prize winning organization that helps civilians recover from the effects of war.

The Power of Silk

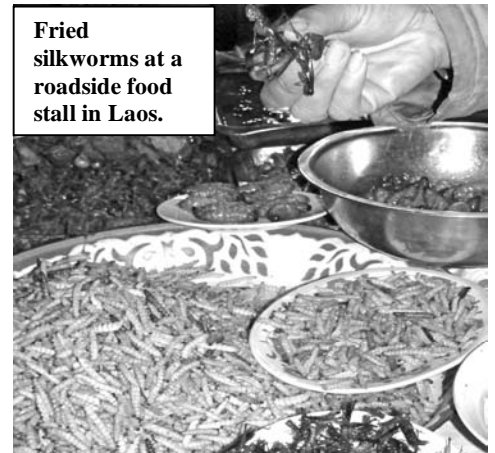
Having a mother who weaves, I can't remember a time that I didn't know that silk came from silkworms. I do remember learning that they eat mulberry leaves, and most of us also learned in physics or biology class that one strand of silk is stronger than the same size thread of steel. But there are myriads of additional fascinating tidbits I have only stumbled upon through studying Laos' silk textiles.

For example, did you know:

- One silkworm cocoon contains from 1/2 to one mile of continuous silk.
- 35,000 silkworm eggs weigh about 1 ounce. 32 to 38 days after hatching, they are about 3 inches long, and have multiplied their weight 10,000 times.
- It takes 3,000 cocoons to make 1 pound of silk.
- It takes about 200 silkworms to make a tie.
- About 8 strands of silk are twisted together to make a thread.
- To harvest the silk fiber, silkworm cocoons are boiled, and the hot water causes the strands to loosen, allowing for the cocoons to be unwound.
- Silk is often used for bedding as it is hypoallergenic, and resists dust mites, mold, and fungus.
- Silk clothing is warm in the winter and cool in the summer.
- The way to tell if a fiber is silk is to burn it - it will have a distinctive protein smell, and the ash left will be a brittle and crushable black ball. In contrast, cotton will leave a long grey ash, with its own woody smell, and any man-made material will leave a bead of hard plastic.
- Silkworms are rarely found in nature any more. They are predominantly a domesticated animal, much like a cow, and rely upon humans to feed them.
- The Chinese were the first to discover how to obtain silk about 4,500 years ago, and, for a time, anyone caught disclosing the secret of raising them was put to death.
- Silkworms are a good source of protein, and when fried they taste a bit like corn!
- Laos has two types of silkworms; the yellow that make a softer silk, and white that make a finer silk.
- All silkworm cocoons have three separate types of silk: the outer layer is coarsest, the middle is finer, and the part closest to the worm is the finest. These layers can be separated as the silk is unwound, or all combined (as in many Lao textiles) for a "medium" thread.



Silkworms boiling to loosen the threads for unwinding.



Fried silkworms at a roadside food stall in Laos.

Silk is one of the most desired fibers for weaving intricate, enduring, and beautiful fabrics. It is famous for the sheen unobtainable from other natural weaving fibers such as cotton, wool, linen and hemp. Given the beauty of the Laos silk weavings, I, for one, am extremely pleased that the Chinese discovered how to harvest the protein spit of this little larval caterpillar.



Silk textile woven with the yellow "medium" Laos silk thread, which combines all three types of silk. This type of silk is also used in the supplemental weft of shaman cloths.



Silk textile woven with the white finer Laos silk thread from the inner layer of the cocoon. (This pattern is still available in both red and blue – stunning creations!)



Silk being dyed in the juice from the mulberry fruit, a byproduct of the mulberry leaf production to feed the silk worms. The fruit is delicious, and makes a dark earthy red dye.

Under a Mountain, by Zall (age 12)



In the boat on the Nam Hinboun facing the mountain we were about to motor underneath.

spotter with a headlamp rode in front, then two of us, and then the head-lamped driver who steered with an out-board motor, the type with a long shaft and a small propeller. He instantly turned on the motor and slowly eased his way around the maze of canoes. Once we were a little ways away from the land, he gunned the engine and off we went, up the river.

The rock formations sped by like race cars, desperately trying to pass the one ahead of it, but to no avail. As the light died from outside and everything turned pitch-black, the two guides turned on their headlamps. The thin beams of light were the only existing source of illumination. The cave was maybe 25 feet across, with the black rock sides worn smooth from times with higher water levels. Sometimes the cave got much wider and we seemed to go through some larger “rooms.”



Climbing out of the boat to see the grotto.

About 30 minutes into the trip we glided to a stop without a jolt. He again motioned us out but then he started walking up a very slanted hill where we had to hold onto a rope to climb up. What we saw when we got to the top was an amazing, huge, lighted cave with stalactites and stalagmites hanging and climbing from everywhere. The only modern part was a small trail (which no one used) leading across the cave. Everywhere you looked was carpeted in amazing formations. The most amazing part was that you could, if you had no manners or respect, climb over everything. Nothing said: “do not touch” or anything like that. After 15 minutes of walking among 20 and 30 foot high pillars of drippy limestone, we went down the steep hill again and climbed in the boat. Our driver again gunned the engine and off we went.

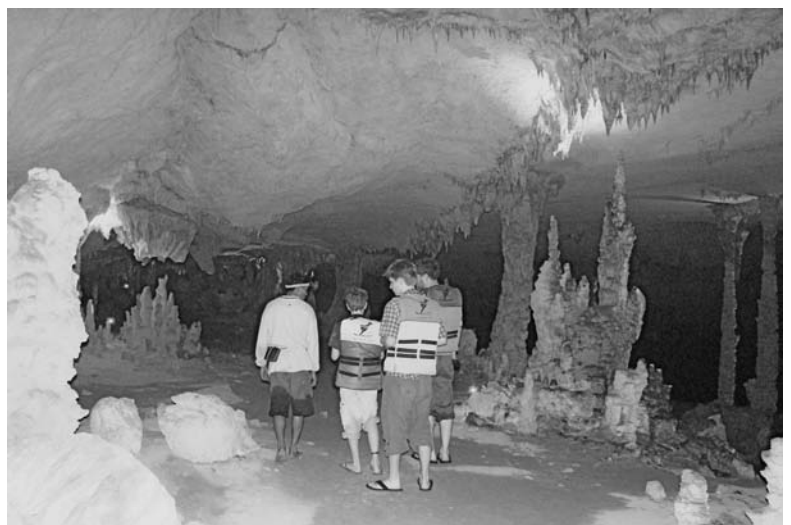
One of the weirdest places I’ve ever been, and one of the greatest experiences I’ve ever had, was under a mountain. Yes, under a mountain. The Tham Kong Lo in Khammuan Province, central Laos, is a cave with a river (Nam Hinboun) that literally runs for seven kilometers under a mountain. Once we heard about it, we had to go.

We took a quick sawngtheaw (pickup with 2 benches in back) ride to Kong Lo, a village at the mouth of the cave. There, we saw what they meant by a river running through a mountain. What we saw was quite literally a river running through a mountain. Just a cave with water gushing out of it. But what stood tall in front of us was the real shocker. A huge mountain stood guard, watching the entrance. We paid the boatman and he asked us (through sign language) to follow him. We followed him through a short, windy path that followed the river until we got to what looked like a docking area. Our guide motioned us to stay there while he went over to get our boats. I tried taking a few pictures but it was way too humid and the lens immediately fogged up. A couple minutes later our driver came back with another man and two boats. He motioned us to get in the teetery 4-person canoes; a

spotter with a headlamp rode in front, then two of us, and then the head-lamped driver who steered with an out-board motor, the type with a long shaft and a small propeller. He instantly turned on the motor and slowly eased his way around the maze of canoes. Once we were a little ways away from the land, he gunned the engine and off we went, up the river.

A quick jolt almost sent me flying through the air. Our driver got up and waved us out of the boat. I looked at him questioningly but he waved again. I stood up and dropped my foot off the side of the boat, the riverbed was there to stop my foot. My mom and I both stood up and he pulled the boat on top of the rock that had stopped the boat. He then gave a yank and the boat went over the rock to the other side, we got back in and kept going.

Many stops like this happened as it was the dry season and the river was very low. We passed many strange rock formations and although we couldn’t see all of them due to the level of light, we occasionally caught a glimpse of one.



In the grotto under the mountain!



After 15 more minutes of a dark but incredible ride, we burst out into the light again. The boats were guided through jungle until we reached a dock and got off. Stretching my legs, I went over to a stand and our family bought things to drink. Ten minutes and we were loaded back into the boat and heading back the way we came, downriver this time.

As we entered the dark of the cave it felt like we were entering another dimension. To this day, I still think it wasn't real. Even as our boats slid into the familiar sight of the dock where we had started, and our driver arranged a home-stay for us, I still was amazed at the enchantment of this world.

Our first view of daylight, leaving the cave.

Let's Eliminate Cluster Bombs Altogether, by Ari (age 15)



Spent bombies at MAG-Laos in Phonsavan.

On March 11th, President Obama officially signed an omnibus bill that included restrictions on the exportation of cluster munitions. Though this is a significant change and improvement from the previous regulations around cluster munitions that George W. Bush refused to alter, it is not a final solution. The United States (government) recognizes this and, soon, will either be passing or rejecting the "Cluster Munitions Civilian Protection Act," which will make it illegal to use cluster bombs that have over a one percent failure rate, require that a "specific military target" be chosen as a drop location, that cluster bombs can not be dropped areas "where civilians are known to be present or in areas normally inhabited by civilians." Assuming this act passes, it will also be an improvement, but there is still more that needs to be done.

During my family's and

my travels we have seen countless people who have been disabled by unexploded ordnance that is left over from the cluster munitions that were used during the "Secret War" that was waged in Laos during the Vietnam War ("conflict"), especially children. Many of the children that live in Laos take the cluster bombs (which look strikingly like balls) and play with them. They will often play catch or take them apart in order to remove the ball bearings that are inside of them to use as slingshot ammunition. The children and adults who we have seen with missing limbs and broken hearts have convinced me that the vagueness in the wording of the Cluster Munitions Civilian Protection Act allows too much room for the continuation of the use of these horrible weapons that regularly still kill people thirty-five+ years after they were dropped.



The boys and two MAG personnel at a site in the process of being cleared. It is safe to walk between the bricks on the white-painted sides only.



Cheerfully posing MAG staff taking a break from searching for ordnance with a metal detector.

It is not only Laos that suffers the consequences of cluster munitions. In the first gulf war in Kuwait, the US dropped cluster bombs, and since hostilities ceased 1,220 innocent Kuwaitis have been killed by UXOs. In 2003, the US dropped 13,000 cluster bombs (about 9 million bomblets); somewhere between 2 and 3 million of these potentially live explosives remain in the soil. Of the 4 million bomblets Israel dropped on Lebanon in 2006 (purchased from the US), over 1 million did not explode upon impact. Failure rates remain close to 30% and innocent people are killed and maimed by the "residue" of past wars on a daily basis in

several countries. Allowing these UXOs to be dropped and left viable in the soil is morally wrong, and reminds me of terrorist methods designed to frighten and punish the innocent.

Cluster bombs have to be more than just restricted. They need to be eliminated from our arsenal altogether. The violence against innocent civilians needs to stop.



Village children watching the MAG mine-clearers near their homes.