

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

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*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



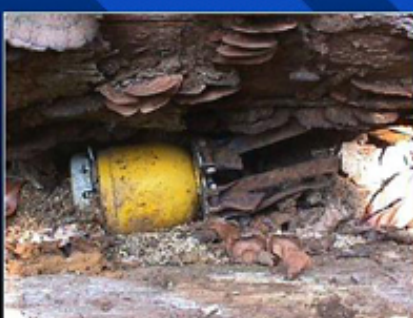
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Source: [legaciesofwar.org](http://legaciesofwar.org)

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](http://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](http://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](http://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.

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Featured image: Undetonated ordnance piled up. [Source: [nwasianweekly.com](http://nwasianweekly.com)]

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