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The Insider

Bombs Away

A retired Wisconsin principal now digs for explosives. by Karen J. Coates

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Jim Harris crouches on one mud-stained knee, gingerly probing the dirt around a fist-sized bomb. A boy found it while digging for insects in the southern Laotian village of Phonephanpek. Harris is calm, but concerned. The hour is late, the sun painting everything ochre. "I hate finding ordnance this time of day," he says.

Harris, a 60-year-old retired elementary school principal from Weston, a small town just south of Wausau, is a tall mustachioed man with a few wisps of gray hair. He towers over most Laotians, but retains the gentle, patient manner of a longtime educator. Here in Laos, his lessons center on weaponry and survival.

Between 1964 and 1973, the United States dumped 4 billion pounds of explosives on this sparsely populated Southeast Asian country as part of its efforts to battle communist supply lines during the Vietnam War. U.S. bombers conducted one raid every eight minutes for nine years. "Bombies," as the locals call them, were packed by the hundreds into canisters that opened in midair, scattering the load. Up to 30 percent of those bombs never detonated, and Laotian soil remains contaminated today. Villagers are maimed and killed every week while farming their fields, foraging for food or searching for scrap metal. "Digging is dangerous," Harris says.

After retiring in 2003, Harris went to work for a New Zealand-

based bomb clearance organization, Phoenix Clearance Limited – hardly the usual retirement path. “I’ve never been burdened by practicality,” he says.

His interest in the country stems from the flood of Hmong refugees who settled in Wisconsin (home to the

nation’s third-largest Hmong population). Harris began vacationing in Laos, meeting the distant families of his Wausau-area neighbors and returning with accouterments to educate students about Hmong culture.

Half the year, Harris goes village to village, teaching Laotians about unexploded ordnance. “This is my retirement,” Harris says. “I could be golfing.”

Instead, he and his Laotian partner Yai knock on doors, scramble through fields and forest – hurdling fences, tramping through muck, battling leeches, mosquitoes and a tropical sun – to find bombs that villagers have seen. He goes anywhere the bombs are – which is everywhere. “The first six months Yai and I worked together, we blew up 1,000 bombies,” Harris says. “Then I stopped counting.”

Back in Phonphanpek, Harris returns the next morning with a clearance team to take out the bomb. “It can kill you up to 100 yards,” he says. Team leader Khonesavan investigates the ordnance while four others blast the air with bullhorns, warning villagers to move out.

Khonesavan discovers a second bomb nearby, which complicates the procedure. He carefully moves the explosives into a hole, then places an old red brick of Russian TNT, the size of a soap bar, atop the bombs. A firing line leads several hundred yards to a small box with a crank and button. The entire village listens to the countdown: three, two, one – BOOM! The blast rattles the heart as red earth and gray smoke flies through the air.

Then it’s all clear.

Two bombs gone, unknown millions remaining. Harris rejoices in one more small victory.

“It’s a great job, really.”