35 years after the Secret War in Laos, the bombs remain

BOMB HARVEST

"A truly inspiring film..."
Jenny Neighbour, Sydney Film Festival

In bomb disposal you only make one mistake

A STUDY GUIDE BY KATE RAYNOR

www.metromagazine.com.au

www.theducationshop.com.au
Introduction

During the Vietnam War, more than two million tonnes of bombs were dropped on Laos. This exceeds the number of bombs dropped by all the Allied forces during World War Two. With a population of only three million, there was almost half a tonne of bombs dropped for every man, woman and child living in Laos. The country endured nine years of this heavy and relentless bombardment, with the US dropping a planeload of bombs every eight minutes, day and night, from 1964 to 1973. About a third of the population was killed, injured or rendered homeless by the air war. The statistics are horrifying – 580,000 bombing missions in nine years, with one mission, one B52, equating to more than one hundred bombs. From this background, it is all too clear that Laos deserves the terrible title of the ‘most heavily bombed country on the face of the planet’. But as Kim Mordaunt’s harrowing documentary Bomb Harvest reveals, the horror and suffering did not come to an end with the departure of the B52s. Thirty percent of the bombs failed to explode on impact and remain alive and deadly today. In excess of 13,000 people have been killed or injured by this lethal detritus since the end of the war, and people continue to die on a weekly basis from explosions.

Bomb Harvest critically examines the far-reaching consequences of foreign policy decisions from another era. Bombs litter the Lao landscape and have made it all but impossible to farm in some areas. It would seem the poor of Laos are left with two unpalatable choices: hunt for food in the jungle or hunt for metal to sell. Many of the villagers pick and scrape at their land, harvesting the new cash crop of scrap metal and feeding the dangerous industry of bomb scrap dealers.

At the heart of Bomb Harvest is Australian Laith Stevens, an Explosive Ordnance Disposal
(EOD) Technician teaching at the National Unexploded Ordnance Training Centre in Laos. With his warmth and good humour, Laith provides an engaging focal point for this story. He works for MAG (Mines Advisory Group) and has to contend with the fact that there are simply not enough trained people to remove all of the bombs in this scarred and damaged country. These are complex structures, with a huge variety of fuses and mechanisms, and as Laith acknowledges, every situation is different: ‘The students want exact answers but this is not an exact science, there’s a lot of grey area.’

It quickly becomes apparent that these bombs pose daily risks. In Savannakhet Province, we see a huge unexploded bomb, containing eighty-seven kilos of high explosives, partly submerged in a rice paddy behind a school, curious children milling about. Later another is found in the middle of the dirt track the children travel to and from school. There are twenty-five houses in the vicinity, as well as the electricity substation. Laith says in his dry, laconic way, they must get it out or the people will just build the road over it.

The bombs that litter this poor but beautiful country are a potent symbol for the enduring after-effects of war: thirty-five years since the end of the conflict, a generation who weren’t even alive at the time must risk their lives to deal with the deadly legacy of unexploded ordnance left behind. Their story deserves to be heard.

Curriculum Links

Bomb Harvest is an important film on a terrible topic. It highlights issues concerning international and global responsibilities between first and third worlds, and provides insight into the dreadful legacies of war. With extended footage of disposal crews working on live bombs, it is a tense and exciting viewing experience; students should find it both gripping and thought-provoking. Laith Stevens, the film’s central character, is inspiring and charismatic in a low key, self-deprecating way, and he provides a terrific point of entry into this complex subject.

The following discussion points and activity suggestions are aimed at middle to senior secondary Media Studies, Studies of Society and the Environment, History, International and Asian Studies. Teachers are encouraged to select and adapt activities according to their teaching contexts, and the particular needs of their students and relevant curriculum areas. The study guide concludes with a list of resources. Teachers are advised to check out web sites prior to student research sessions – some contain graphic, disturbing photos of bomb victims.


Lao: The Scars of War

Capital: Vientiane

Official Language: Lao

Population: approximately six million (as of July 2007)

National Anthem: Pheng Sat

Currency: Kip

Government: Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP)

The ten countries of Southeast Asia: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Phillipines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The three countries in Southeast Asia that make up Indochina are Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

The Laos population consists of over fifty ethnic groups, roughly falling into three broad categories: Lao Loum; Lao Theung; and Lao Sung.

Laos is the poorest country in Southeast Asia, with basic transport and few paved roads.

Since 1975, the official name of the country is Lao PDR (Lao People’s Democratic Republic) but it is still widely referred to around the world as Laos. It is pronounced Lao or Louse.

• Divide the class into small groups to conduct research into Laos in order to build up background context for the film. Topic areas could include: population, land, climate, economy, politics, history, religion, ethnic and language groups. Students present their findings to the class.
• Investigate the history of relations between Australia and Laos.
• In Bomb Harvest, we see footage of children collecting bombies for the scrap metal dealers. They can get ten cents for a bombie. Using the Internet or your school library resources, what can you find out about living standards in Laos and average incomes? What factors account for the poverty of this country?
• Laos’s main export is coffee; there has also been involvement in the illegal opium trade for heroin. What can you discover about industry in Laos? Explore the proposed hydroelectric station and investment from Thailand.
• Investigate the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).
• Describe the various landscapes depicted in the film. Note in particular contrasts between jungle areas and those clearly decimated by air strikes. What aspects of the physical terrain make it particularly difficult to locate and remove the bombs?
• ‘The Lao people we see in the film are much more than just victims of war.’ Discuss.
• Make a list of the problems confronting a district such as Ta Oi. (Consider issues other than the bombs and their obvious consequences: for instance, poverty; inadequate housing; poor medical assistance; and dirty water.)
• What are the goals of the United Nations for Laos? (see http://www.unlao.org) What impact do UXO have on these goals?
• History: investigate the Geneva Accords of May-July 1954 confirming Laos’s independence.

**A Secret War, A Dirty War**

The war in Laos was in effect a clandestine operation, with very little information seeping back into the West. There were rules of engagement for Vietnam and Cambodia (for example, no bombing within half a kilometre of a temple or hospital), but in Laos these rules were not observed. The Hague Convention, ratified by the US, prohibits the bombardment of civilian populations in undefended villages, but this was disregarded. In 1962 the Geneva Accord forbade the presence of any foreign military in Laos. Fourteen nations signed this agreement, including the US and North Vietnam, both of whom broke it. US operations in Laos involved indiscriminate carpet bombing, conducted without the approval of Congress or the knowledge of the American people. Laos was also used as a dumping ground for bombs, with pilots on instruction not to return back to base in Thailand from bombing missions in Vietnam with undelivered bombs.

• One of the key factors behind the West’s involvement in the Vietnam War was the fear of the so-called Domino Effect in Southeast Asia. What was this theory?

• What does Laith say about the Domino Effect now?

• Investigate the Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty, signed in September 1954 by the US and designed to prevent Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.

• Why was Laos bombed so heavily? (Primarily to cut off supply lines for the North Vietnamese which ran through Laos, and also to stop the growing Communist movement in Laos.)

• What was the Ho Chi Minh Trail used for during the Vietnam War?

• The US aim was to ensure a ‘neutral’ Laos. How did this actually play out?

• Why was the US’s massive bombing campaign in Laos known as The Secret War?

• We see archival footage of then President Richard Nixon in 1969 stating categorically: ‘There are no American troops in Laos’. How might he have justified such a bold-faced lie? Is it ever acceptable for a politician to lie? What might have happened had the American public been aware of the bombardment of Laos at the time?

• What is a ‘bombardment war’? Laith notes that because of the nature of the conflict, the people never got to see the ‘enemy’. What effect might this have had on the villagers enduring nine long years of bombing?

• Imagine you were a villager at this time. Write a diary account of your experiences.

• ‘It’s not over when it’s over. The worst of war comes after cease-fire’. Discuss.
Imagine you are a B52 pilot visiting Ta Oi in 2007 and observing the devastating after-effects of the war. Write a letter to the village chief.

Mr Pom is ninety-six years old. During the air war, he lost his wife, his brother, his children – everybody. Time has bowed him and he stoops towards the ground, shuffling away from his village. He says that during the war there was ‘nowhere to hide, not even a cave’. Observing the trainee bomb demolition crews, he says, ‘They came back to disturb us again’. The evacuations are very painful for the older people, inducing flashbacks and intensely traumatic memories. Write an account of the war from Mr Pom’s perspective, using the information about his background provided by the film.

We see footage of B52 pilots praying: ‘Our gracious heavenly Father, we give thee thanks for the ability to be used as thy servants to seek freedom for the world as we know it. Guide us in this our mission that we might successfully complete not only this but other activities in life. These and other things we ask in thy name’. How does this prayer sound forty years on, given what we now know of the mission to decimate Laos? What is actually meant by ‘the world as we know it’?

**Bomb Harvest: Looking Closely At The Film**

Encourage students to take notes during the screening and to jot down their impressions and any questions or issues that might require clarification.

- Discuss the pre-credit sequence. Consider the following points: the filmmakers have deliberately chosen to open their film with a shot of children and the outline of a bomb; we see shots of feet near bombs; and the film’s title is set against a slow motion explosion in the jungle, with debris raining down as the ground shakes. Discuss the thematic significance of these opening moments and the ways in which they gesture towards the film’s overriding preoccupations. Note: children account for roughly half the deaths in Laos from unexploded ordnance (UXO) and they figure prominently throughout the film.
- Consider the music used in the film and the ways in which it contributes to the mood. What qualities might the filmmakers have been looking for in the score?
- Why might the filmmakers...
have wanted to make this film? In what ways might increased awareness of the situation in Laos help the Lao people?

• A title at the end of the film tells us that the scenes of children handling and examining bombs are dramatic re-enactments with safe bombs. What sort of ethical issues arise from the use of re-enactments in documentaries?

• The film crew had unprecedented access to the bomb disposal teams and spent eight weeks in the field shooting. All the bombs dealt with by the teams are live. How might the filmmakers have decided what footage to use in the final film? Given the nature of the work and the trainees’ lack of experience, the filmmakers probably discussed the possibility that they might film a demolition that resulted in trainee casualties or even fatalities. Discuss the ethics of incorporating such footage into a film like this.

• We see several villagers in Ta Oi who have lost limbs to the bombs, and two men speak of their experiences and the horrific injuries they sustained. There is one graphic photograph of a dead child, mutilated by a bomb, but overall the film is restrained in this regard. How might the filmmakers have negotiated the final tone of their film? Is the possibility of exploitation an inevitable issue with films that deal with such shocking and disturbing topics? How does Bomb Harvest avoid exploiting the plight of the poor Lao villagers?

• What precautions might the film crew have needed to take to shoot the bomb detonations?

• What sort of challenges and difficulties might have confronted the film crew during their shoot in Ta Oi? Consider the following: Ta Oi is an extremely remote area, five hours drive from the closest small town and two days’ drive from the Lao capital, Vientiane. The roads are rough, and there is very basic accommodation, with no phones, no mobile phone access, no fresh drinking water, limited food supplies, and unreliable electricity. No Western film crew had ever been into that region before. The villagers speak a different dialect from Lao, and there are no Ta Oi speakers who also speak English. It was also very hot and malaria season!

• The film uses archival footage to good effect, particularly audio of US pilots reflecting on their experiences and shots of the land under bombardment. Interview material and dramatic re-enactments also feature. Make a list of all the different types of material used in the film.

• Design a poster to promote the film. Annotate your design choices.

• Write a fifty word synopsis of the film.

• Write a review of the film for a daily national newspaper.

• Compile a class list of other possible titles for this film. What associations does the phrase ‘bomb harvest’ evoke?

• The film’s closing sequence centres on the Rocket Festival. Why might the filmmakers have chosen to use this sequence to close the film? Consider the ways in which these scenes reaffirm traditional life in Laos. It is a festival of hope for future prosperity. Everyone looks to the smoke-filled skies, and with each big bang, Laith flinches (an occupational hazard?). He jokes that they’re trying to shoot the American planes, only forty years too late. The last shots are of children’s pictures depicting the bombs’ presence in their daily lives.
Over the closing credits we see children playing in the water, with the sinister shape of a bomb sticking up from the waterline in the foreground of the image. This provides a hideous contrast of childish fun and innocence with the imminent threat of death and mutilation.

**Laith Stevens: Better Than Brad Pitt**

- It’s a long way from the beaches of the New South Wales Central Coast to the bombs and leeches of the Lao jungle. Make a list of ten adjectives to describe Laith. Now write a character profile of him.

- What personal and professional qualities make Laith good at his job? (Consider for instance the ways in which he repeatedly plays down the drama and danger of the situations he is involved in and uses humour to lighten the atmosphere. As his trainees roll a bomb down a rocky slope and it gets away from them he calls out ‘This isn’t such a bloody good idea’. He is also approachable and self-deprecating – ‘I have a face like a dog’s arse.’ – and he makes an effort to establish rapport with the villagers. We see children laughing delightedly as Laith entertains them with his version of traditional Lao dance.)

- Laith is very aware that the trainees often fail to voice their concerns because they don’t want to lose face. What does he do to try to relax them? (He ‘acts the clown’, making fart jokes, etc)

- ‘Laith is a hero’. Discuss.

- In what ways might Laith be considered a particularly Australian character?

- How has Laith’s attitude to war changed? (He says that as a young soldier he was ‘champing at the bit to go’. Now, seeing the mess left behind and dealing with the attempts to clean up, he’s ‘not so keen to jump in’.)

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*’Bombs are not made to be dismantled. You must think. A mistake means your life.’*

- Trainee Souvanh

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Laith Stevens examines a bomb
Bang! Bomb Disposal Training

- The training program we see in the film is organized by UXO Lao, established in association with the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), which coordinates all UXO-related activities in Laos. Laith is employed by MAG (Mines Advisory Group), an international humanitarian organization established in the UK in 1989 and funded by donation. MAG has worked in around thirty-five conflict affected areas in the world, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 for work with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Visit http://www.mag.org.uk to find out more about this organization.

- What is the Big Bomb Project?
- Laith was trained as an engineer in the Australian Army. In what ways might his training have differed from that of the Lao people we see him working with?
- What are the three main options in dealing with a live bomb? [i) destroy it on the spot; ii) destroy it elsewhere; and iii) destroy it on the demolition range]
- Laith praises his interpreter, Linthong Syphavong, and the two men obviously have a warm relationship. Why is a good interpreter so crucial to Laith’s work?
- The two interpreters, Linthong Syphavong and Phonesai Silavan (Bob), share a similar background. What is this and how might it contribute to their success in this particular field? (They were both monks.)
- Laith, Mike Rowlay from MAG and the Lao trainees set off to the remote region of Ta Oi where they will complete their training. The aim is to remove sixty-nine bombs in four weeks. Laith says that for the trainees they will be ‘out of their comfort zone’. Why?

'Tell him to go easy with that pick, mate. I'm not scared, I just don't want to f****** die.' - Laith Stevens
(The villagers of remote Ta Oi speak different dialects and represent different minority groups with different belief systems.)

- Why did Laith and Mike choose Ta Oi for the practical component of the course? (It is where the Ho Chi Minh Trail crosses into Vietnam and because of its proximity to the border it is ‘absolutely littered with bombs’.)

- Who is ultimately responsible for the removal of these bombs? Should the US government bear some moral, financial and legal responsibility?

- What sorts of injuries have been sustained by some of the Ta Oi villagers? (Many have lost limbs. One man was trying to grow rice when a bomb went off. He says, ‘I can’t even describe the pain I was in’. Villagers had to carry him a day’s walk to find medical help.) Describe the prosthetic limbs villagers have fashioned.

- Bombies were designed to maim rather than to kill, the logic being that maimed soldiers and civilians are more debilitating to the enemy than dead ones. Cluster bombs are still used today and a study has found that 98% of casualties from them are civilians. What are the features of a cluster bomb? What efforts are being made to ban their use?

What is meant by the statement that cluster bombs are ‘indiscriminate’?

- In what ways are cluster bombs similar in impact to landmines?

- What percentage of land in Laos is at risk from UXO? (See http://www.uxolao.org for accurate figures on these and related issues.)

- Make a list of occupations that require people to confront fear and danger. What methods and procedures might be used to help people deal with their fears in such risky work?

- What does it mean to have ‘heightened senses’? Have you ever experienced a moment like that?

- Laith speaks of the ‘post-demolition rush’. What does this mean? What do the trainees do to unwind?

- Chanthavone Inthasone is the only female EOD teacher. What particular difficulties might she face? Describe the culture of the EOD.

- More bombs equal more beer. What role does alcohol play in this culture?

- Laith says he risks being ‘vapourized into a pink mist’ and that ‘waking up to another day of bomb disposal can be a bit daunting’. But for all the inherent dangers of his work, he experiences less stress than he would sitting at a desk in an office in Sydney. (He also notes that there are enough bombs in Laos to keep him busy for the rest of his life.) Why might a person like Laith find a desk job stressful? Is confronting death the most stressful experience you can imagine?

- Trainee Douangchai says that six people were selected from each province to be considered for training in bomb disposal. Three people
passed and three failed. What qualities might the selectors have been looking for?

- Laith watches the difficulties Douangchai faces trying to evacuate the village. He meets with resistance from the elderly, the sick and the drunk. Laith notes, ‘Some things you can’t teach’: the trainees need life experience to be effective. Douangchai is clearly trying very hard but he is not a strong leader. Why? (He lacks confidence, is not decisive, is not ready for responsibility, and does not have the trust of the villagers and his team.)

- Unlike Douangchai, Pina is what Laith calls ‘a switched-on dude’. He doesn’t get flustered, he is confident and has good rapport with his team. He is also a good listener. Laith is sure he will make a good team leader. Devise a Compare and Contrast Character Chart for the two trainees, highlighting their differences and what we learn of them from the film.

- Early on in their time in Ta Oi, Laith realizes there are too many obstacles in their way: they will not be able to meet their original goal of removing sixty-nine bombs. What difficulties do they face? (For instance: difficult terrain; difficult local customs to accommodate – e.g. on the day of a funeral, nothing other than the body is allowed to be carried, so they must drag the bomb they are working on, which increases the risk; difficult weather; difficulties dealing with the villagers; trainee inexperience; and incorrect maps.)

- Why will the wet season cause a six month delay? How might the technicians prioritize which bombs need to be removed most urgently?

- Bomb scrap trading is illegal, but one large bomb equates to food for two to three months for an entire family. As Laith says, ‘We’re fighting a losing battle’ to discourage the children from hunting for bombs. He notes the villagers have mixed feelings at the removal of a bomb. Why? (The bomb represents terrible danger, but also a source of potential income.)
Paying Attention: Film Comprehension

Questions

1. What did Mr Chualing, Village Chief in Ta Oi, do during the war?
2. What is distinctive about the Ta Oi village houses?
3. What is a bombie and how many of them were contained in one dispenser?
4. Why does Laith say bombies are particularly dangerous for children?
5. Laith has two brothers. What do they do?
6. How is bomb disposal work regarded by the Lao people?
7. What foods do we see Laith being offered?
8. The aim is to remove sixty-nine bombs from Ta Oi. How many do they get out?
9. What is a ‘cracker barrel’?
10. What is the purpose of the Rocket Festival?

Answers

1. He was a medic.
2. Their stilts are made from bombie dispenser hulls.
3. A bombie is a type of cluster munition, basically a mass of ball bearings around a hunk of explosive. There were three to four hundred bombies in a dispenser; as Mike says, with bombies, ‘if there’s one, there’ll be more’.
4. They look like pieces fruit or balls and children are often tempted to pick them up and play with them.
5. They are all bomb disposal technicians!
6. It is a respected career choice.
7. flying squirrel, lizard and rat
8. They finally manage to remove forty-three bombs.
9. It is a procedure in bomb disposal designed to shear off a live fuse.
10. The Rocket Festival asks the gods for rain for the planting season.

Characters

Laith Stevens, Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Technician, Mines Advisory Group (MAG)
Mike Rowlay, Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Technician, Mines Advisory Group (MAG)
Linthong Syphavong, Laith’s interpreter
Phonsai Silavan (Bob), Mike’s interpreter
Chanthavone Inthasone, female EOD teacher
Mr Chualing, Village Chief in Ta Oi
Trainees: Souvanh Douangchai Pina
Mr Pom, elderly Ta Oi villager
RESOURCES

Web Sites:

Background Information on Laos

http://www.lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html
Library of Congress Country Studies

http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1154621.stm
Country Profile

CIA The World Factbook

http://www.home.vicnet.au/~lao/laoVL.html
Laos WWW Virtual Library

http://www.aseansec.org
Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

http://www.jhai.org
Jhai Foundation (works with Lao villagers on education, health, technology and economic development issues)

http://www.vientianetimes.org.la
Vientiane Times (Laos’s official daily newspaper)

http://www.unlao.org
United Nations operations and programs in Laos

Anti-Bomb Groups

http://www.mag.org.uk
Mines Advisory Group

http://www.stopclustermunitions.org
Cluster Munitions Coalition

http://www.disarmco.com
Disarmco: Munitions Disposal

http://www.gichd.org
Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian De-mining

http://www.uxolao.org
Laos National Unexploded Ordnance Program

http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=arms_clusterbombs
Human Rights Watch on Cluster Bombs (includes Cluster Munitions Information Chart, among a great deal of other information)

http://www.icbl.org
International Campaign to Ban Landmines
Bomb Harvest

http://www.legaciesofwar
Legacies of War
http://www.mcc.org/
clusterbombs/
Mennonite Central Committee
(Check out the Frequently Asked Questions and the excellent Time Line.)

Bomb Details and Specifications
Military Analysis Network
http://www.ordnance.org/cluster_bombs.htm
The Ordnance Shop

Books
Ralph Littauer and Norman Uphoff, The Air War in Indochina, Air War Study Group, Cornell University, 1972.

Article

Film
Bombies (Jack Silberman, 2002), 57 minutes

Bomb Harvest
Duration: 55 or 88 minutes
Director & Cinematographer: Kim Mordaunt
Producer: Sylvia Wilczynski
Writer/Researcher: Kim Mordaunt & Sylvia Wilczynski
Editor: Adrian Rostirolla
Original Music: Caitlin Yeo
Sound Recordist: Daniel Miau
Sound Designer & Mixer: Michael Gissing

Lemur Films

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