

# The Lethal 'Litter'

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**By Earl Martin**

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As Vietnamese refugees begin to trickle back to their farms in the countryside, they are facing a serious threat of injury or death from field littered with volatile garbage — "live" bombs, "dud" artillery shells, and undetonated mines and booby traps.

Already some farmers have been killed upon return to their rural homes, according to American refugee assistance personnel.

The official Defense Department figure for U.S. munitions used in Indochina from 1965 through 1972 comes to more than 30 billion pounds: approximately one-half were ground weapons — artillery and mortar shells, mines, etc. — and one-half were aerial weapons — bombs and rockets.

## FAILURES

Accepting Defense Department estimates that only one to 2 per cent of ground

and air munitions fail to explode, (other military personnel estimate 10 per cent), the people of Indochina will have to contend with 300 million to 600 million pounds of "live" explosives in their fields and forests for years to come.

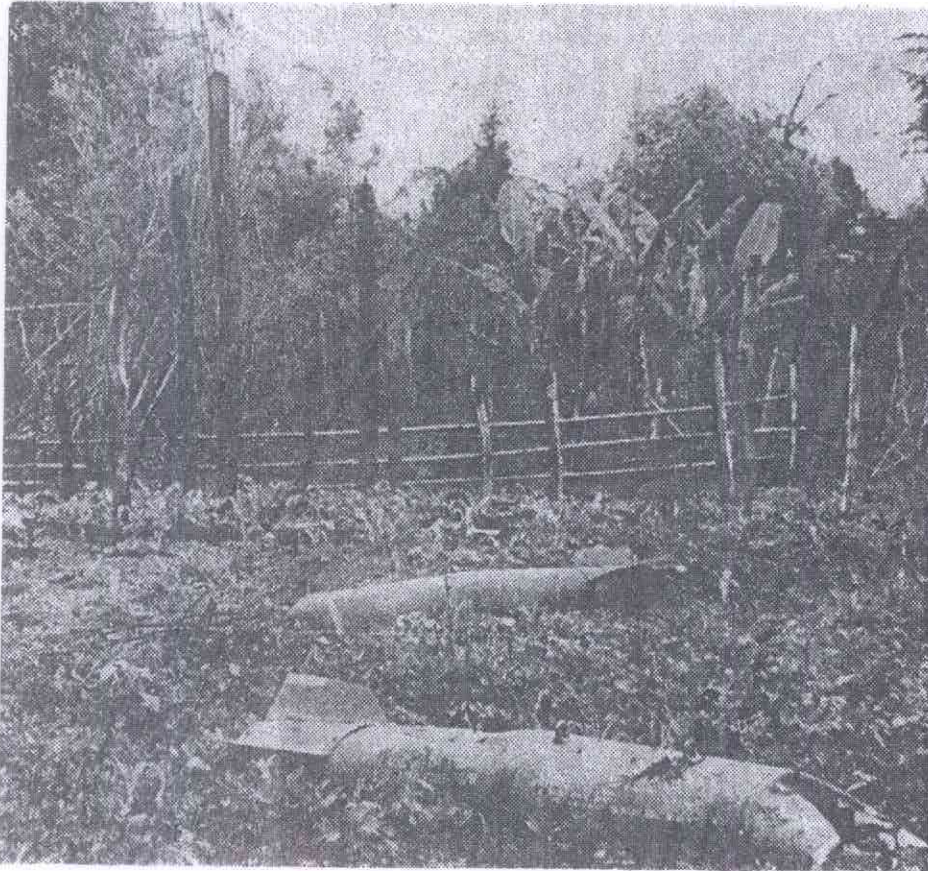
This conservatively means that from two to four million individual bombs and shells lie dormant on (or buried under) the soil of Indochina.

No reliable estimates are available for the amounts of explosives used by the armed forces of North Vietnam or the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG — commonly known as the Viet Cong). Whatever the amount it is generally believed to be far less than that used by the U.S. and Saigon.

## THREAT

But the booby traps and minefields which the guerrilla forces set to discourage American or South Vietnamese troop movements in the countryside will pose a danger for returning farmers unless they are removed. In those areas where the insurgent forces continue to operate in the countryside, however, they will know the exact locations of the booby traps which they laid. They will be able to

# in Indochina



An all too common sight —unexploded bombs in a Vietnamese field

point out and detonate these charges when the people return to the countryside.

The reason that the explosive junk of the United States far exceeds that of the Communists springs

from military tactics. The standard operating procedure called for identifying suspected locations of the guerrilla forces by ground or aerial reconnaissance and then summoning air attacks

and artillery bombardment to eliminate anyone in that area.

One result of this profligate use of firepower is that thousands of undetonated charges now await the returning farmers of Quang Ngai province, and nearly every other province in Indochina.

## BOMB

A type of weapon which Vietnamese farmers will likely be encountering for generations to come is the "anti - personnel" bomb. This consists of a large "mother bomb" that bursts in air, dispersing as many as 500 baseball-sized bomblets. A delayed action fuse detonates the bomblets each of which spew out several hundred steel pellets in all directions. It is reasonable to assume that thousands of these small bombs failed to explode.

The technical problems involved in a systematic defusing of the Vietnamese

countryside would be formidable. "Explosives and ordnance disposal" operations consist of three basic steps: detecting, uncovering and disarming.

The detection process alone is not simple. The instruments available to find hidden bombs are magnetometers, simple metal detectors which usually cannot distinguish a bomb which failed to explode from the metal shreds of one that did. Wherever "duds" exist, such shards are also bound to be plentiful, thus severely limiting the utility of the magnetometer.

## EYESIGHT

In the end, the most effective way to discover much of the unexploded ordnance will probably be visual sighting, although this leaves untouched all the covered devices. Since it is dangerous to touch or disturb any explosives equipped with a fuse, however faulty that fuse may be, each bomb or shell sighted will have to be detonated by a blasting charge.

There is speculation that intense heat may touch off some of the smaller mines or anti-personnel explosives. Should this prove of to be an effective method, it may be possible to dispose of some



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## AF Charges Pilot Who Balked

of the charges by burning off fields during the dry season. There is less hope that this process would detonate larger shells or bombs, or any ordnance buried beneath a cover of soil.

Many explosives are ignited electrically or by sharp pressure and these also may be unaffected by heat.

On some occasions during the war, huge bulldozers, called Rome plows, were driven back and forth through fields and brush areas to detonate booby traps and other small explosive charges. This method may be feasible in some circumstances for cleaning up farm lands in the future, although such equipment would be impossible to use in wooded areas. The bulldozers and their operator also would be vulnerable to large bombs.

The U.S. military has trained some South Vietnamese army personnel in explosive and ordnance disposal and the Defense Department now says it is up to the South Vietnamese to take care of the "live" ordnance.

The desire of refugees to leave their camps and return quickly to their ancestral homes is strong, and apparently some have already

### Washington

An Air Force pilot assigned to Thailand faces a possible court-martial for refusing to fly a combat mission over Cambodia, the Pentagon confirmed yesterday.

Captain Donald E. Dawson, 26, of Danbury, Conn., has been charged under the Uniform Code of Military Justice with refusal to obey an order and is under investigation on other charges, a spokesman said.

Dawson is officially stationed at Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts and has been temporary Air Base in Thailand, long the headquarters for many American bomber flights in Southeast Asia.

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run headlong into the dormant explosives. A recent letter from an American refugee relief worker tells of several farmers in Quang Tin province who have already been killed upon returning to their fields.