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## Looking at Legacies of War: Cambodian Self Help Demining [CSHD] and Hope

In this final quarter of 2024, it is hard to find light in the darkness in a world at war. In the lesser devastating category of global political wars, there were close-call elections where European far-right populists were narrowly defeated. In the more pressing category of physical wars, Ukraine v. Russia, Israel v. Palestine, and a civil war in Sudan dominates headlines. The casualties mount daily. The war zones get murkier with tangential attacks on other countries and/or an influx of displaced persons crossing borders for food, shelter, and safety. We are fed a steady diet of war content in our news reports; we can see what is going on around the world via the phones we now carry with us everywhere. In many instances, official media reports on war are conflated, disseminated, or overshadowed by unofficial social media reporting.

But we must remember that the media picks and chooses what it will share, just as social media platforms constantly curate an algorithm that is good enough to bring us back to their applications. Sometimes, we must look beyond the immediate headlines and seek underreported stories of war. In a recent (31 August) weekend column for *The Guardian*, war historian Paul Ham wrote about his ability to stay optimistic despite being “inured to the idea that war is probably inevitable and violence intrinsic to human nature<sup>1</sup>.” He posits that humanity simply needs to recognize that all wars are fought based on our innate “need of gods, national myths or brutal ideologies”<sup>2</sup>; once we awake from the illusions of these things, then we will better know peace.

Ham admits that “self-described realists” believe “we’re stuck in a dialectic of eternal conflict, which promises only constant war and anarchy.”<sup>3</sup> I’m not sure where I sit, ideologically, on Ham’s scale of historical evaluation. I still believe it’s just something humans like to do. Like animals, some of us are more conflict adverse (the American Black bear, for example) while other of us are more likely to choose violence when provoked (the Grizzly bear, for example). But most wildlife – save outliers like the Black Mamba or the Nile Crocodile – only seek combat when threatened or aggrieved; they are otherwise pacifists. Outside of hunting for food, their violence is limited, especially compared to the awe-inspiring heights of violence mankind has become capable of reaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Ham, Paul. (31 August 2024). “As a war historian I was pessimistic about human nature. Writing the history of the mind has changed me.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/sep/01/paul-ham-the-soul-a-history-of-the-human-mind-book-feature>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ham, Paul. (31 August 2024). “As a war historian I was pessimistic about human nature. Writing the history of the mind has changed me.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/sep/01/paul-ham-the-soul-a-history-of-the-human-mind-book-feature>

War is hard to work with – most of the stories aren't uplifting or "happy," especially when we examine the human costs of war. The different ways that the legacy of wars appear in our collective experiences is of interest to me. Wars rarely neatly begin and end on the dates chosen by historians, and recovering from war is complicated. There is always, of course, the human cost – lives lost by the sides fighting, lives lost as "collateral damage" – includes deaths and those still alive. Where do you return to if your hometown has been bombed into rubble? And what of the very earth that war takes place on, the ground; if it is riddled with unexploded bombs and mines, how do we remake now dangerous soil? Can you live on it? Can you farm it?

The United States dropped nearly 5 million tons<sup>4</sup> of ordnance via over a million bombing raids during the Viet Nam War (1959 – 1975), approximately 2.7<sup>5</sup> million tons of which landed on the Cambodian-Vietnamese border from October 1965 – August 1973. The Khmer Rouge conflict (1967 – 1980) beget additional placement of landmines throughout the country. 58 years later, UXO from these wars still prohibits the peoples of Viet Nam and Cambodia from safely living and working in their country. Cambodia is not the only country riddled with UXO; countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America all suffer from UXO.

So those who have survived war – and their offspring – are given the unenviable task of rebuilding after war. In Siem Reap, Cambodia, UXO (unexploded ordnance) workers are often born after the Viet Nam War or Khmer Rouge conflict. In May of 2023, I went to Siem Reap, Cambodia to interview UXO workers and educators at Cambodian Self Help Demining (CSHD) and APOPO (a Dutch acronym which in English translates to Anti-Personnel Landmines Detection Product Development). Prior to my time at CSHD and APOPO, I visited a place I'd been before, Project RENEW in Dong Ha, Viet Nam, another NGO working on UXO. Through casual conversation about their work, I heard a fairly traumatic childhood story from one of RENEW's employees. It involved an undetonated bomb and the death of a family member. This event was one of the reasons that they had decided to work in the de-mining sector in Viet Nam.

What is truly brave about UXO workers in Cambodia and Viet Nam is that they are often working with full knowledge of the dangers of their work. Mr. En Poy, a member of CSHD's Explosive Ordinance Risk Education team, for example, has visible UXO injuries. When asked about them, my translator answered:

"He was at the Thai border [as a child], playing with his friend, and his friend brought over a bomblet. He didn't know what it was at the time, and sort of tested it out, applying impact, tapping it against a light post. And that's what lead to his right arm [amputated at elbow].

We had a team that passed away in January 10, 2022 and he was on that team and was the only survivor. During that time, he was part of the EOD team, the on-call demolition unit. It was a breach of the safety protocol mistake [that killed the team

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<sup>4</sup> Humphrey, Chris (2023). "50 years since US troops left Vietnam, bombs continue to kill." *Al-Jazeera Media Network*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/26/50-years-after-the-vietnam-war-ended-its-bombs-continue-to-kill>.

<sup>5</sup> Owen, Taylor & Kiernan, Ben. (2006). "Bombs Over Cambodia." *The Walrus Magazine*, October 2006, Yale University Press. [https://gsp.yale.edu/sites/default/files/walrus\\_cambodiabombing\\_oct06.pdf](https://gsp.yale.edu/sites/default/files/walrus_cambodiabombing_oct06.pdf).

and injured Mr. Poy's eye] – there wasn't a proper refresher after Covid, so he's lucky to be alive."<sup>6</sup>

That Mr. Poy was still a jolly, joking person despite two life-threatening injuries was a victory in and of itself, in my opinion, but what impressed me further was his obvious passion for being part of the UXO solution. He revealed that his wife worried less when he was placed on the Education team, which meant he was less likely to get into the line of fire, but the education program was fiscally struggling; the results of removing or detonating a mine or UXO produces a tangible result, but education takes longer to bear fruit that donors and the government can trace or track. But this did not deter the workers' spirits. One of Mr. Poy's colleagues, My. Ly Ra, for example, was still working with UXO education and efforts at retirement age. Mr. Ra was clear that "[his] heart's still with demining. There's still a lot of UXO and landmines, and by being able to out in the field and be involved in bringing about awareness is what motivates him. He worked for CMAC<sup>7</sup> for quite some time."<sup>8</sup> Everyone at CSHD, no matter what capacity they were working, was passionate about their work helping their communities.

The emphasis on taking care of each other – neighbors, strangers, farmers, just fellow Cambodians – is central to the ethos of every UXO worker I have met. Mr. Ny Ly, a trained medic and a member of CSHD's EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) team, emphasized that helping people all over Cambodia was not only personally rewarding, but also fulfilling for the organization. He noted that "Cambodia is heavily dependent on the agricultural sector and farming. Being able to help in that capacity makes [him] happy even though, as [he] goes from one village to the next, helping people – even if there's an injury non-related to explosives, [he's] able to take the time to care for people, a service [he] can offer."<sup>9</sup> Mr. Ly was obviously proud to be able to not only help with mines but also with individual's non-mine related health issues; giving back was central to his character, as well as central to the mission of CSHD.

The UXO workers at Cambodian Self-Help Demining in Siem Reap are very much what historian Paul Ham would identify as a "self-described realists." They know what war does to a country and people, and they are fully aware what conflict can inflict, even beyond the date it may have "ended." CSHD's EOD Team Leader, Mr. Voan Voeng, told me that a global initiative promoted by the HALO Trust, an international NGO, to be "Mine Free by 2025" was "just a political façade. [It's] just specific to mines and known minefields. There are still thousands of inflicted areas, it's hard to find funding and because of that campaign there's a misconception of what's left to do."<sup>10</sup> The sphere that these workers operate in is not ideological, but demonstrable. Their stories, while often grim, are also inspiring. If there is any light to be shown in these final months of 2024, it is to be shown on these people, the quiet survivors of war who are coping with war wounds unseen

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<sup>6</sup> Poy, En. Personal Interview. Cambodia Self Help Demining Office, Siem Reap, Cambodia, 22 May 2023. McCoy, E.

<sup>7</sup> Cambodian Mine Action Center

<sup>8</sup> Ra, Ly. Personal Interview. Cambodian Self Help Demining Office, Siem Reap, Cambodia. 22 May 2023. McCoy, E.

<sup>9</sup> Ly, Ny. Personal Interview. Cambodian Self Help Demining Office, Siem Reap, Cambodia. 24 May 2023. McCoy, E.

<sup>10</sup> Voeng, Van. Personal Interview. Cambodian Self Help Demining Office, Siem Reap, Cambodia. 22 May 2023. McCoy, E.

and under-funded. They persist, just as war does, but stronger in their mission to heal versus war's quest to hurt.