

ESSAY

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By Gerry Lyall Secretary VVMCT-Cambodia Inc

Tony "Bomber" Bower-Miles was a young engineer in the Australian Army when he first went to Vietnam in the late 1960s. Land mines (*in particular US made M16's*) were one of the principal threats faced by our troops, and much of Bomber's work involved cleaning up the aftermath of these and other terrible explosive devices positioned by the enemy and used to great effect against Australian troops.

Tony returned to Australia scarred, battered and unable to relate to a peacetime world. But he wasn't prepared to let the war beat him. In 2001, he returned to SE Asia, putting his minefield breaching and clearance skills to work in the task of locating and destroying some of the millions of land mines that still contaminate Cambodia. On a shoestring budget, Bomber established the Vietnam Veterans' Mine Clearing Team. In early 2008 the VVMCT-Cambodia Inc was registered as an incorporated entity in Queensland.



These days, Bomber, I and Mac McGregor (*Vietnam veterans*) physically and financially support the Cambodian Self Help Demining NGO. We assisted with its certification as a demining entity with the Cambodian government and now support it with donations we collect from the public in Australia.

The CSHD is tasked by the Cambodian Mine Action Authority (*CMAA*) through its arm MAPU to designate which minefield the CSHD will clear. There are between 4 to 6 million landmines still in the ground and around 40,000 amputees throughout Cambodia. A good percentage are children... now growing into young adults. Another of our donation

targets is the CLMMRF which has an orphanage attached to its operation. We (*VVMCT-Cambodia Inc*) donate thousands of US dollars to them every year. The Cambodian Land Mine Museum Relief Fund is also operated by Aki Ra, the same man who operates the CSHD NGO. Some of the kids have lost limbs due to landmines, while some are "at risk kids" from the streets. The underlying reason for their situation is landmines. While both MAG and HALO concentrate their efforts on large tracts of land in heavily populated areas, the VVMCT, with the CSHD, take on smaller minefields in very remote rural communities.

All three VVMCT-Cambodia advisers pay their own airmiles, accommodation costs and meals and spend around 60% of their time in Cambodia at the minefield advising and supporting the CSHD deminers. The result has been no CSHD deminer has been injured in a mine incident in its short history. The VVMCT does not deduct a single cent from a donation. All the administrative costs are borne by us personally. It ensures that every penny donated is used entirely for the reason for which it was donated.

The CSHD through the efforts of the VVMCT has been responsible for returning valuable farming land to the people of the remotest regions of Cambodia. Our last tasked minefield came about because seven men from the Tror Peang Tem village were killed over a short period collecting wood from the same area. That field was cleared just prior to the end of 2009. The CMAA ensures that each registered demining NGO has 3 years work ahead of it to complete. The next minefield to be cleared by the CSHD is on the Thai – Cambodian border in Oddar Meanchey Province and demining has already begun on the site. Each minefield is surveyed for contamination and identified by GPS readings. Kochumbok was 60,000 sq metres which is an average of these minefields regarded as small. On the Thai – Cambodian border just north of Anlong Veng, the minefields are several



kilometres long by several kilometres deep. (The K5 Belt). Because of Cambodian border protection needs, I doubt if the K5 will ever be cleared due to its ongoing border protection role.

We have talked with the UN in Phnom Penh along with MAG and HALO about the time frame for the completion of demining in Cambodia. The UN wanted a 2015 completion date. The demining NGO's present at that meeting could not accept that timeframe. At the end of the day, it was agreed that 2019 would be a more realistic figure. This timeframe was the point where the major deminers (*MAG and HALO - being the major players*) could leave Cambodia. By then the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces Engineers should be able to handle whatever contamination remained. Support from the VVMCT-Cambodia is expected to wind down to coincide with that 2019 timeframe. That is not to say that Cambodia would ever be safe from landmines. ERW's will still be pushing their way to the surface for the next century.

With increased funding, another demining team and a ready reaction team could be put in to the field by the CSHD. This would double our efforts but then double our financial commitment. At present, our annual obligation ranges from USD\$100,000 to USD\$130,000. With one extra team, our commitment would then exceed USD\$250,000 pa. This is beyond the capacity of our present donor base. In the interests of making their country free from landmine contamination and returning it to a sustainable agrarian society, the VVMCT needs funds to continue to support the Cambodian Self Help Demining NGO.

In 2009 the CSHD has put almost one hundred families back on land that hasn't been used for years, if not decades. Land that was killing people a year ago, is feeding them now. The CSHD is to institute a 'Cow Bank' in 2010. A sponsor buys a cow which is loaned to a farmer to use and breed. The first calf goes to another farmer. The second he keeps, third is returned to the bank to pay off the loan. Now we not only put people back on the land, we can help them restock and farm it. Your support is vital to seeing our plans implemented and the demining of Cambodia completed within the next decade.

Donations can be made by (BSB) Bank Transfer - Cheque - Postal Order.

All donations should be made out to:

Vietnam Veterans Mine Clearing Team-Cambodia Inc

and sent to:

25 Balloch Street, WISHART. Queensland 4122

or

BSB: Bank Transfer:

Bank: Westpac Branch: Springwood

BSB: 034-076 Account No: 354687

VVMCT-Cambodia Inc

Australian Business No: 22 868 580 912

Incorporated No: IA:36313

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