

# Hobby Deminers in Quang Tri Province

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UXOs in scrap yards.  
Photos c/o Mark Pirie



Hobby deminers heading to work.  
Photo c/o Mark Pirie

Boy with blast injuries to his legs.  
Quang Tri Province. Photo c/o Don  
Price

In the old days, anybody driving Highway 1 through the Vietnam central coastal regions could see neat stacks of unexploded ordinance (UXO) displayed everywhere beside the road. All the dangerous debris of past wars lay there like alien goods in storefront windows, each cairn marking the location of a scrap metal dealer. About four years ago, the Vietnamese government determined such displays were inappropriate for a country moving to re-establish itself as a presence in the world community. The UXOs disappeared from view. The scrap metal dealers either removed their inventories to caches in the countryside or moved them behind screens.

In Quang Tri Province, hunting for, recovering and reselling scrap metal from UXOs remained one of the few income-generating activities in one of the most economically depressed places on the planet. Passers-by can still see UXO stacks, but now they have to stop, park and walk inside the fences of the scrap metal dealerships.

Quang Tri Province (QTP) is located almost at the midway point between the northern and southern tips of Vietnam where the "DMZ" used to be during the American War. Quang Tri, in other words, was the front line, a combat zone where more bombs were dropped (measured in raw tonnage) than fell on all of Germany throughout the Second World War.

As a result, QTP is littered with UXO-artillery rounds of all calibers, air-dropped bombs ranging from 2000 pound giants down to tennis-ball-sized "bombies," mortar rounds and grenades. Of all this "pollution," perhaps the most dangerous to the life and limbs of the people of Quang Tri are M-49 grenades and the M-32 cluster bomb units the Vietnamese call bombies. The M-49 and M-32 are small enough that children take them for toys... sometimes with sad results.





Four children carrying homemade mine detectors. Dong Ha, 1999. Photo c/o MAP

Post monsoon. UXOs exposed in a wash. Photo c/o Don Price



As they enter the puberty years, those same boys who might have played with the UXOs they could find lying exposed everywhere in Quang Tri might also become "Hobby Deminers." Equipped with homemade metal detectors, these boys now actively seek out UXO, which they can sell for a few cents to the dealers.

If those boys survive their learning experiences, they might well become adult "Hobby Deminers," the nickname given by professional deminers (Vietnamese military and NGO contractors) to the civilians who make a living seeking out, defusing, transporting and selling UXOs for profit.

The equipment the "Hobby Deminers" use is ingeniously constructed. They analyze the component parts of commercially produced metal detectors and reproduce the technology using what they could find: the rings cut from metal

Amateur deminer,  
Dong Ha, Quang Tri  
Province, 1998. Photo  
c/o Don Price



Amateur deminer's kit  
packed for travel. Dong  
Ha, Quang Tri Province,  
1998. Photo c/o Don  
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transistor radios tuned to pick up the faint radio emissions most metals give off, hi-fi stereo headphones and scrap wire.

Most of the time, the "Hobby Deminers" unearth relatively small UXO, antique barbed wire, etc. Sometimes, they get... lucky? The man in the picture below, sitting on the ground beside his find, certainly was lucky, twice. He found an unexploded 500lb bomb with the entire explosive material still inside (bonus payment), and defused it for transport without making any final mistake in the process.

At the scrap metal dealer, the UXOs are processed for sale. Precious metals must be separated. Often, a young man will use a hammer to knock the aluminum rings out of the impact detonators taken from 105mm artillery rounds. The detonators are still technically "live." Aluminum

and copper are the most valuable of the scrap metals commonly found littering Quang Tri. The steel in the jackets of expended artillery rounds and bombs for the most part are recycled and used by automobile manufacturers.

The Vietnamese government attempts to discourage civilians from handling or seeking out UXOs. The people of Quang Tri are fighting against the pressures of poverty even though there are national-level initiatives and programs in place to enhance the transportation infrastructure of the province and to attract business and international aid investment to Quang Tri. For the near term, however, there are few incentives to discourage children and adults from trying to make some money from the dangerous scrap metal trade.

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Roger Hess, UXB International, and Mr. Duc, MAP driver/interpreter, inspect a 500lb bomb that just rolled off the back of the truck in front of the scrapyards. Note: bomb has been defused but still contains high explosives. Quang Tri Town, Quang Tri, May 1999. Photo c/o Douglas Patt

