

# Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

---

Volume 10  
Issue 2 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 31

---

November 2006

## The Human Face of EOD

Howard M. Thompson  
*H.M.T. Insurance Brokers Ltd.*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Emergency and Disaster Management Commons](#), [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Thompson, Howard M. (2006) "The Human Face of EOD," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 31.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol10/iss2/31>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).

# THE HUMAN FACE OF EOD

by Howard M. Thompson [H.M.T. Insurance Brokers Ltd.]

Being a specialist insurance broker to explosive-ordnance-disposal organisations around the world has provided Howard Thompson with the opportunity to be on the sidelines of the humanitarian-demining community. But during a 10-day visit to Cambodia, he was able to experience first-hand the significance of humanitarian demining and clearance. He writes about this experience here.

For many years now, my company has specialised in the insurance requirements of mine-clearance and explosive-ordnance-disposal organisations operating around the world. During that time, I have learned much about the skills and methods engaged in the field and have been fortunate enough to visit many mine-clearance operations, particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

In 2006, I joined one of my clients, Mines Advisory Group, for a 10-day visit to their operations in Cambodia and there saw even more forcefully what the “human” element of humanitarian demining is really all about.

Having seen many specialists working in the field, demining by hand with the aid of machines and dogs, I have nothing but admiration for their work. However, this visit showed me something to which, until then, I had not attached a real human face. How many times have I read, heard and even said “the purpose of humanitarian demining is to return land to its people?”

Only when you meet the returning people and see the pride they have in their homes and recovered land does it truly hit home how much mine clearance really means to the people of mine-affected communities.

While in Cambodia, I visited many places as a tourist in Phnom Penh and Seam Reap and played operator on a remotely controlled Tempest flail machine (see photo 1). My efforts to clear



Tempest flail machine.  
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF HOWARD M. THOMPSON

bamboo and brush in the field certainly did nothing for the environment at large as a result of my cavalier approach to trees and anything else that got in the way. I was soon relieved of my post!

The variety of locations we visited and the many individuals encountered will remain in my memory for a long time.

The familiar sights of a demining programme were well in evidence, whether manual, mechanical—such as the Bozena (see photo 2)—or of the canine variety as displayed by the Cambodian Mine Action Centre team in photo 3.



MAG Bozena.



CMAC team with dogs.



MAG deminer conducting manual demining operations.

And of course there were some less familiar sights. For instance, MAG is unusual in engaging female as well as male deminers. One such young woman explained her story. Her husband had been killed by a mine, so she had to provide a living for herself and her three children. Working for MAG made so much sense; she was helping her community and providing herself with a good living (see photo 5).

Another deminer (see photo 6) taking a break in the heat, was himself a mine victim. He also had a family to support—and a large one, at that. He had fathered three sets of twins! Demining, therefore, gave him a better-than-average living to maintain his larger-than-average family.

Moving on from where the work was being carried out, we entered the small village of Preah Put, which had been built on cleared land just a short drive from the area where clearance work was still being carried out. In this village we really saw the full benefit clearance work can achieve. Young families were comfortable and secure, making homes for themselves and creating the beginnings of a thriving community.

It was hard not to feel like an intruder in their world. Such thoughts were soon dispelled however; they made us feel so welcome and were very warm and friendly, which provided sheer enjoyment all around. I will hold these memories dear.

First, we met a woman who told us that her husband worked across the border in Thailand cutting wood (see photo 7). She was happy to share her story with us while sitting on her veranda; the little boy was not so sure about us, though!

The next woman we met was far less comfortable. She lived in a rather fragile house, alone with her children. Her husband had recently died of tuberculosis and one of her children had to live elsewhere because there was no room for all of them in this new home. She bravely held back tears as she told her story.

She kept her distance from the other villagers, and her children did not join the followers who attached themselves to us as we meandered through their village. She now has a new home and a completely new start. Her story is a sad one, yet I hope her life and her children's lives will soon improve as they all come to feel like a real part of this new community.

In complete contrast, the man in photo 8 is responsible for the community's irrigation supply, which was created from ground cleared by the MAG team. This pond now helps the growth of his and his neighbours' crops. He needed very little persuasion to boast about his situation and to be photographed beside his pride and joy.

Photo 9 is a genuine display of a different sort of pride. A little boy delighted in showing us the community's recently created water supply and exactly how best it could be used, especially on a very hot day.

Could photo 10 be looked back upon in years to come as the start of the Cambodian neighbourhood Wal-Mart? This is one shrewd business-woman! She moved here to start a “village store” from her house. She says the land is fertile and again safe. She knows the community will grow and the area will become wealthy as a result of the produce being farmed and the bamboo and fruit being harvested. What's more, the mine clearers are nearby, continuing to clear a large strip of land that is planned for more housing. As families return or move in, her business will grow. It seemed a very good business move to me.

We made an additional stop in the village to see a small mine-risk education class held by MAG community liaison personnel (see photo 11 on next page). One little boy proudly displayed the scars he received from an explosion. Luckily he had survived reasonably unscathed; his playmate had not been so fortunate.

Our final visit was to Ta Lou, a school that was inaccessible due to mines when MAG first arrived in the area in the mid-1990s, but which was now flourishing



Female deminer for MAG.



Man in front of the community's irrigation supply.



MAG deminer with prosthetic limb.



Boy enjoying his community's new water supply.



Thai family.



Woman in front of her village store.



Mine-risk education class.



Ta Lou school.

(see photo 12). The school director asked MAG Executive Director Lou McGrath to make the school a priority. It has since grown to become the main primary school for a wide region of the countryside around Preah Put.

The Director of the school, himself a mine victim, was clearly pleased and proud to welcome us to his school. This school operates with full classes; each child attends for half a day resulting in a complete changeover at midday. This was probably the most emotional occasion in the entire trip.

There is so much enthusiasm for learning in Cambodia, and it provides quite a salutary lesson for our part of the world. Beautifully dressed and immaculately clean children emerge from their village homes and walk or cycle for miles to get to the school. The comment most often made to us was that education is a vital element in ensuring the dreadful history of Cambodia is not repeated for this generation. Hopefully with schools such as Ta Lou and their dedicated staff and enthusiasm, their aim will be achieved.

Throughout the journey, I was amazed at the number of schoolchildren we saw cycling or walking in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere, shielding themselves from the dust of passing vehicles and somehow remaining immaculately dressed in their school uniforms. Their school journeys would make British children gasp with the thought of such long travel and required dress. British schoolchildren have it **much easier!**

Here at Ta Lou, we met some of the children in their basic but effective classrooms (see photo 13). Never having been a great scholar myself, I did not feel too guilty about interrupting their lesson.



Ta Lou classroom.



Schoolchildren and staff members welcome visitors.

The key members of the school staff and local dignitaries were assembled to meet us and, in spite of experiencing a “mini rainy season,” a special occasion was made of our visit and we were all included in a school photograph (see photo 14).

I am proud to say that our company has placed the insurance for most of the organisations engaged in the humanitarian-demining world. The work of clearing mines and ordnance will have to continue for many years yet, but seeing the results of successful clearance and its effect on just a few small communities made me rather proud to be associated with the progress the humanitarian-demining world is making—even if that involvement has predominantly been from the safety of an office desk in Surrey in the United Kingdom. ♦



**Howard Thompson** is the founder of H.M.T. Insurance Brokers Ltd., a unique insurance brokerage firm concentrating on insurance for international, high-risk operations.

Howard M. Thompson  
 H.M.T. Insurance Brokers Ltd.  
 26 Station Approach  
 Hinchley Wood  
 Esher, Surrey  
 KT10 0SR / United Kingdom  
 Tel: +44 20 8398 2362  
 Fax: +44 20 8398 4568  
 E-mail: [howard@hmtib.co.uk](mailto:howard@hmtib.co.uk)  
 Web site: <http://www.hmtib.co.uk>