

CHAPTER 5

War Debris in Postwar Society: Managing Risk and Uncertainty in the DMZ

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On 1 August 2009, the frontpage headlines of the popular *Tiền Phong* [*Vanguard*] newspaper captured the attention of its readers with a rhetorical question and mocking observation: “Only after another three hundred years will Vietnam be clean of bombs and mines?” The accompanying color photograph showed a young Vietnamese soldier protected only by his green camouflage uniform and army-issued hard hat, carefully removing unexploded ordnance (UXO) from a contaminated site. Between 2004 and 2008 alone, the article reported, a joint Vietnamese-US clearance project had disposed of more than 24,000 explosives from 1,300 hectares of land (Kiều Oanh 2009).¹ Given the extensive use of bombs, mines and other explosives by the United States during the war, at this speed, the article determined, it would take 300 years to clear the remaining contaminated 6.6 million hectares (ibid. 2009). On the same day, the English-language daily, *Việt Nam News*, published the results of a US-funded study on the number of people killed (437) and wounded (489) by UXO in Vietnam over the past five years. Hazardous war debris, the article pointed out, remains a great risk to the population and a “serious obstacle to development” in rural areas,² particularly in the province of Quảng Trị, which is reported to have the highest density of explosive remnants of war (ERW) in the entire country.³

One week later, the newspaper released a glowing report about the rapid economic development of Quảng Trị, celebrating its “East-West

Economic Corridor” as the center of the region’s commercial and international trading activities.⁴ Accompanying the text, an image of large transport trucks importing goods across the Laos-Vietnam border gate at Lao Bão suggested economic mobility and transnational interconnectivity. New economic zones, nonstate enterprises, locally-owned businesses, and an emerging service sector appeared to have transformed this war-ravaged landscape into a flourishing zone of industrial and agricultural production, commerce and trade.⁵ Moreover, the commodification of former US military bases and war sites along the infamous Highway 9, packaged and sold to international visitors as the “DMZ tour,” has likewise reconfigured the economic and memorial landscape of Quảng Trị (Schwenkel 2009). Yet for all the new opportunities and signs of a long-awaited recovery, citizens continue to face substantial hardships and challenges stemming from the war with the United States. In the summer of 2009, an exhibit on Highway 9 at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi also reminded its viewers of Quảng Trị’s intrinsic duality — the promise of progress beside the specter of disaster.⁶ In this chapter, I examine the strategies used to manage the risks and uncertainties associated with the enduring and potentially explosive legacies of war debris in Quảng Trị in both formal and informal UXO clearance activities, focusing on the divergent and at times overlapping ways in which risk is assessed, regulated, confronted, and mitigated.

The concept of “risk” as an analytical tool to understand modernity and contemporary political economy has long occupied scholars in the humanities and social sciences. As Anthony Giddens argued in *Modernity and Self-Identity*, “Modernity is a risk culture ... [T]he concept of risk becomes fundamental to the way both lay actors and technical specialists organize the social world” (Giddens 1991: 3).⁷ In the field of anthropology, Mary Douglas (1990, 1992) took this claim even further, arguing that risk cultures — in the plural⁸ — are defined by shared constructs of danger and threat that reinforce moral boundaries and regulate social conduct. Notions of risk, scholars continued to show, have never been stable or historically fixed, but are culturally contingent, fluid, and subject to debate.⁹ Moreover, in an age of unprecedented global capitalism, risk and uncertainty cannot be understood as simply negative or potentially destructive forces that require intervention and control. As Caitlin Zaloom has argued in her work on the “productive life” of risk, risk-taking has been actively embraced and cultivated in the marketplace and on the trading floor where “risk reaps reward” and signifies “exemplary acts of productivity” by rationally calculating economic actors (Zaloom 2004: 365). Active engagement with risk,

in other words, is fundamental to the growth of a neoliberal economy and its governance strategies that identify risk and risk management as key to regulation, control, and development. Contemporary risk cultures, according to Nikolas Rose, are “characterized by uncertainty, plurality and anxiety, and [are] thus continually open to the construction of new problems and the marketing of new solutions” (Rose 1999: 160).

In this chapter, I approach demining and UXO clearance practices in the former DMZ through the analytical lens of risk perception and risk management. I am interested in the emerging tensions between strategies of risk aversion and confrontation in the formal and informal sectors of ERW disposal; that is, in the field of professional demining and in the scrap metal industry. As Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) pointed out long ago, social and political dissent over what is considered hazardous and how to reduce risk are common in every culture and society. Gaps between expert opinion and public perception of danger have engendered new institutions, alliances, and forms of knowledge to mitigate risk and regulate “risky activity” (Beck 1992: 4; Douglas 1992: 11). Here, I explore how such differences played out on the ground in the region in and around the former DMZ as impoverished residents, many of whom served in the military of the former Republic of Vietnam, attempted to rebuild their lives and communities in the still hazardous landscapes of Quảng Trị. Because of its dangerous potency, war debris remains a powerful signifier of past trauma and present uncertainty. And yet for some it may also offer the possibility of economic productivity, though not without substantial risk. As “imperial debris” (Stoler 2008) that continues to linger on the landscape and inflict new casualties on local communities almost four decades after the US military exited the war, ERW are ambiguous, abject matter out of place that surface unexpectedly and behave unpredictably. As such, they are imbued with the power to make or destroy postwar lives and livelihoods.¹⁰

The first part of the chapter examines the specific strategies and interventions used in Quảng Trị to reduce the threat of risk associated with remaining explosive remnants of war. During my research, these interventions were fundamentally transnational; that is, they integrated the knowledge, technologies, resources, and expertise of actors and institutions, both in and beyond Vietnam. They were also multi-sector, representing collaborations between private industry, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations. The case study provided here focuses on a joint US-Vietnamese UXO clearance mission on the edge of the former DMZ. It highlights the transmission of a particular set of risk knowledge

and risk-mitigation practices from foreign, professional deminers and clearance technicians to Vietnamese deminers-in-training. Risk management and reduction, however, was not without its consequences, and local populations were subjected to a range of new hazards and uncertainties as land was made safe for cultivation and re-habitation. Moreover, the elimination of risk through UXO clearance inadvertently enabled the state to implement new governance strategies and policies of market-based development.

The second part of the chapter examines the complex and often ambivalent responses to risk by scrap metal collectors who confront danger and negotiate unpredictability in their daily economic activities. Dominant risk knowledge and management strategies associated with hazardous war debris, while potentially effective in reducing the number of casualties and deaths, produced a set of norms and proscriptions that governed behavior and gave shape to a moral community that identified risk avoidance as rational and ethical. Scrap metal collectors, on the other hand, as unofficial deminers in the informal economy, appeared to transgress these institutionalized norms by seeking out and engaging risk. However, as I show below, these economic actors adopted their own forms of risk management that at times overlapped with official discourse and practices. Moreover, their perilous economic activities intersected with another set of risk knowledges — that of the global market, where risk-taking itself, in its many forms, is normative capitalist practice. Using the example of collectors at the former Khe Sanh marine base who sell unearthed war relics to international tourists, the last section highlights the fraught encounter between disparate risk cultures — one that stresses avoidance and another that requires its engagement — and the ethical boundaries that are rigidly drawn between purity and contamination. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the intersections between risk aversion and confrontation, and the new alliances that have started to form among the diverse actors and stakeholders who are actively involved in the removal of hazardous debris from the landscape of the former DMZ.

Managing Risk through Removal of Explosive Remnants of War

In recent years, a new addition can be found on the landscape of Quảng Trị: large colorful billboards that warn children to avoid unearthed UXO and caution farmers not to cultivate land in areas known to be heavily mined and not yet cleared. Designed in an artistic style reminiscent of state agitation posters seen throughout the country, the billboards are the result

of a risk education campaign meant to inform local communities about the dangers of encountering and handling war debris.¹¹ Located directly south of the 17th parallel that temporarily divided Vietnam between 1954 and 1975 owing to the Geneva Accords of 1954, Quảng Trị was the most bombed and mined area in the country.¹² Butting up against the demilitarized zone, the province was heavily occupied by US troops and military bases during the war, and it became the site of many long and protracted battles as US forces and their allies strove to halt the southward movement of troops from the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). It is estimated that more than 83 percent of the province remains contaminated with ERW.¹³ This situation has presented great risks and hardships for populations in the area — citizens, including children, are regularly maimed or killed by explosives¹⁴ — as well as unexpected opportunities and alliances. The broad implementation of risk reduction strategies has facilitated new partnerships between international organizations, local government institutions, and the National Army in the fields of victim assistance, information management and UXO clearance. And from these collaborations, a new occupation and area of expertise has emerged: that of the internationally-trained and certified, professional Vietnamese deminer.

Demining work in Quảng Trị is by no means a recent activity. Immediately after the end of the war, the Vietnamese military sent a group of technicians to begin the long and arduous process of clearing the landscape of mines and unexploded ordnance. Casualty rates were reportedly high, and formal training minimal, although many Vietnamese who participated in the war had experience with defusing ERW.¹⁵ When international organizations arrived in Quảng Trị in the 1990s, the transfer of knowledge, skills, standards, and practices from foreign experts to young Vietnamese recruits was identified as essential to effective, long-term risk elimination and livelihood improvement. One operation I visited in 2000, managed by former US military personnel working for a private contractor in cooperation with a US NGO, offered Vietnamese recruits six weeks of intensive, comprehensive training designed to meet the “quality assurance” and safety standards of the “international demining community.” Training units, run by US instructors, typically comprised 25 male soldiers between the ages of 18 and 20. To advance in the program, it was required that recruits pass all examinations with a minimum of 80 percent, and with only one chance at retesting. Many failed. Those who went on to become internationally-certified deminers would “lead good lives in the Vietnamese military,” one US trainer declared. The top-down transfer of expert knowledge, technologies, and best practices was intended to lay the groundwork for future risk

self-management and self-efficacy. As one onsite trainer explained: “This is a turnover system; we’re giving them high-quality training and state-of-the-art equipment to continue to use after we’re gone. And I’ll leave knowing they won’t have any accidents or problems because I taught them the best way [to demine] that I could.”

It goes without saying that professional demining is a high-risk occupation. And while there is a particular prestige in Vietnam attached to national and humanitarian service that rebuilds the country and improves the lives of vulnerable populations, US trainers felt they had to make the risks worthwhile by providing incentives. To do this, they focused on improving the social benefits and cultural capital they saw their young trainees, most of whom came from impoverished backgrounds, as needing and desiring:

We’ve given our guys a better lifestyle. We’ve commandeered better quarters for them — with beds, fans, and televisions. So they have a nice place to live. We take really good care of them — make sure they have good food and water ... Their whole standard of living has come up dramatically and you can see it in the way they walk and carry themselves. They’re very proud to be in this unit and they work very hard to be here.

Self-assurance and the development of what the professional miners called “team spirit” were considered critical to the success and morale of the training unit, and would later serve as an effective tool of risk management during disposal operations. At the individual level, this was cultivated through the establishment of joking relationships and the use of English nicknames and phrases with Vietnamese trainees. “Here!” a Vietnamese technician called “Dunk” by his American colleagues said as he handed me a rare, one-*đồng* coin from 1983. “Small change!” he laughed in English.¹⁶ Group activities, on the other hand, were carried out to build trust, loyalty, and camaraderie between the recruits and also between the recruits and their trainers: “We also do fun things like take them to the beach and buy them food and beer. If someone has a birthday, we throw a party. Next week our unit is playing in a football tournament against another demining unit. If our guys lose, they’ll be working on Saturday (laughs).” Fostering high morale and a joint sense of purpose through off-base leisure activities thus served as a form of risk and danger management when working “on the grid” (section of land to be cleared).

In order to reduce risk and improve safety, explosive ordnance disposal is, out of necessity, collective and highly interdependent work. During my visit to the “5–14 grid” on a former US marine base, technicians

worked in two-man teams for brief, but intense, 30-minute shifts on a 25-square-meter plot, supported by a team of safety and quality assurance (QA) specialists who accompanied the mobile command post. The work was slow and laborious, and required deep concentration. Each move had to be meticulously executed, as one small error could prove fatal for team members. Technicians gently probed the earth with a long, thin detector inserted at a slight angle into the ground, up to 30 centimeters if clearing for agriculture or reforestation.¹⁷ If resistance was encountered at any point while probing, an excavation was immediately carried out. An onsite UXO technician explained to me the procedure:

To do this you start approximately ten centimeters before your point, excavate down ten centimeters, and then slowly begin to probe until you excavate [the ordnance]. You can imagine probing only three centimeters — about one inch — at a time: probe, find something, excavate; probe, find something, excavate. Imagine how long it takes to do that ... One of the smallest land mines is an M-14, which is larger than one inch. So no matter how it's placed in the ground, if you're probing every inch, there's not a chance to miss it.

Indeed, over a two-week period prior to my arrival, the team had excavated two hand grenades, eight 37-mm anti-aircraft shells, one 82-mm and one 81-mm mortar bomb. After removal and identification, technicians were required to perform a visual examination to assess the perceived risk involved in moving a device to an “s-h-o” (safe holding area). There, it would await weekly relocation to a secure demolition pit where collected explosives were detonated en masse each Friday. If risk was deemed too high, preparations for evacuation of the immediate area would begin and disposal was carried out in the place of discovery.

Though the clearance of ERW greatly reduced the threat of traumatic accidents, it also posed a new set of risks and uncertainties for affected populations. Demining can be highly disruptive to local economic activities and damaging to recovering landscapes. During the war, the extensive use of bombs and chemical defoliants in the region left much of the landscape devastated and deforested (see Susan Hammond's chapter). Over the past several decades, natural regrowth and recultivation have slowly transformed this wounded landscape into productive fields, farmlands, and forests. The removal of UXO hazards, however, often required the selective re-deforestation and clearance of land, and the temporary resettlement of local residents. This secondary destruction was seen as unavoidable and provisional. As one US technician pointed out: “It's a necessary evil to

devastate the area we are working in. We cannot search the ground if we have plants on it, so we have to cut them down. Which is worse: cutting a tree or leaving a land mine?" The destruction of crops in impoverished communities was a strong concern expressed by both local citizens and clearance technicians, and demining units attempted to mediate these secondary risks by minimizing the economic and environmental impact of their work. In one example provided by the technician quoted above:

There was a pineapple plantation about six by six meters. And the guys [deminers] went in to search and dig up the anomalies, the metal signatures. But the owner didn't want them digging up his pineapple fields because the fruit was about so big [indicates size] and close to being harvested. So we decided to cordon off that area, wait until the harvest in another month or two, and then resume our search. That made the owner happy. We're not going anywhere for the next few months so we can wait. This is a poor community and the owner has a valid concern. This is his food crop and he doesn't want it dug up by our guys. So we're able to work with the locals that way and we've received tremendous support from them on account of it.

Likewise, the destruction of reforested land also proceeded carefully and selectively according to a set of risk reduction strategies that aimed to preserve the landscape to the extent that it was possible. UXO clearance teams required at least one meter of space between trees to access their root systems and the surrounding soil. Consequently, in densely forested areas, only the selective cutting of trees was deemed necessary. This also provided the advantage of shaded working conditions for deminers who frequently labored under the scorching sun in high temperatures. Carrying metal detectors, brush clearing equipment and basic excavation tools, such as a hoe and a trowel, clearance technicians combed sites, carefully listening for signals of detection. If positive, they mitigated risk by digging to the side of the object and advancing at an angle to avoid direct pressure and possible detonation. In the aftermath of clearance, recultivation and/or reforestation was typically carried out locally (by farmers themselves), at times with the assistance of US-based "peace trips" that brought volunteers to Quảng Trị, including US veterans of the war and their families, to assist in replanting cleared land. These gestures of reconciliation and renewal signaled the symbolic end to cycles of violence and destruction through the collective rebuilding of landscapes and livelihoods.¹⁸

The preparation of land for new housing required a more invasive and rigorous clearance strategy. Contrary to the removal of ERW from

farmland, in areas of new construction, a “deep search” of up to three meters underground was necessary. This also necessitated the displacement of residents, particularly as urban expansion and infrastructure development — such as new roads, markets, and industry — prompted the growth of communities and the establishment of new settlements. There is no shortage of work for UXO technicians in Quảng Trị; for the province to “progress” economically, for officials to carry out plans to build industrial parks and beach resorts, the scope of clearance activities must likewise keep pace. At times, such operations inadvertently fed into state modes of governance that aspire to “modernize” the population and the built environment. During a trip in 2000 to Đông Hà, the capital town of Quảng Trị, a resettlement project in an outlying district had been prioritized for UXO clearance by local authorities. 25 makeshift homes were slated to be “reorganized” (removed from the landscape) due to their provisional, haphazard construction and placement on the landscape. After clearance (of both the structures and the buried explosives), permanent housing for 100 families would be built in accordance with a model of rational and orderly land use planning. While serving the needs of local communities through the reduction of immediate danger and risk, ERW removal in this example also emerged as a technology of power “imbued with aspirations for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects” and outcomes (Rose 1999: 52).

Confronting Risk in Scrap Metal Collection

Despite the rigorous monitoring and evaluation of official UXO clearance sites, including a “quality control check” performed by three different quality assurance technicians at the end of each operation, errors do occur. “With the rough terrains and all, explosives can be overlooked,” one technician acknowledged during my visit. However, as long as bombs and mines are situated deep in the ground, he maintained, they should not pose an immediate threat — unless dug up and handled. “Even a bombie on top of the land is safe as long as it is left alone. Touch and movement could potentially detonate a device.” Risk education campaigns, therefore, explicitly warn local populations, especially children, not to approach, touch, or attempt to move any suspected ordnance, and to report sightings promptly to local authorities. For the most part, these campaigns have been effective in spreading their safety messages. According to a 2008 study conducted by the Technology Centre for Bomb and Mine Disposal (BOMICEN) in cooperation with the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAFA),

97.8 percent of the communes surveyed in Quảng Trị had distributed educational materials about UXO risk to residents or had organized awareness activities, primarily through schools, community meetings, traveling entertainment troupes, posters, public address systems, and local media (BOMICEN and VVAF 2009: 84). In a Project Renew study conducted with the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Health, 93 percent of respondents reported having been exposed to mine education information, primarily through television (Project Renew 2006: 51). And while accident rates on the whole have progressively decreased over the years,¹⁹ UXO contamination remains a serious hazard, especially for one group whose accident rate has conversely increased: scrap metal collectors.

After the end of US bombardment of Southeast Asia, a vigorous trade in war scrap metal emerged in the informal economies of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.²⁰ With the expansion of a global market economy, this trade became increasingly transborder and transnational. Scrap metal from Vietnam travels to Laos, China and beyond; while metal detectors are often imported from abroad. After economic reform policies were launched in Vietnam in 1986, the industry grew significantly. According to a 2008 study, 40 percent of current scrap metal collectors in the adjoining provinces of Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên-Huế joined the trade between 1988 and 1998, when the price of metal began to increase and new equipment — namely, metal detectors — arrived on the scene. Approximately 50 percent of current collectors began their work after 1998 when the average price paid per kilogram more than doubled (Norwegian People's Aid and Project Renew 2008: 46). The price has since continued to rise, and in 2010, a collector could earn up to US \$5 per day (Ngo 2010). As the trade expanded and attracted new and younger collectors, accident rates likewise increased, particularly among ethnic minority communities where in some cases they doubled (Project Renew 2006: 22). Today in Quảng Trị, scrap metal collection has now surpassed farming to become the province's most hazardous occupation. During my last trip to Quảng Trị in July 2010, collectors — young and old alike — were still easy to spot at work in the hills that run adjacent to the repaved and widened East-West Corridor. Such sights differed little from those of my previous visits. As I recorded in my fieldnotes in 2004: “At one point we drove around the bend to find a pair of large tractors parked on a plot of freshly overturned soil next to two young boys with metal detectors and earphones, heads down, eyes intently focused on the ground, slowly making their way across the mounds of red dirt.”

It comes as no surprise that scrap metal collectors, and their risk-taking activities, are largely motivated by financial need. As Michael DiGregorio has argued in his work on the recycling industry in Hanoi, “The informal sector [of junk scavenging and selling] has thus become, at once, an innovative, adaptive and efficient economic sector, and a refuge of the poor” (DiGregorio 1995). In Quảng Trị, poor households are often at an additional socioeconomic disadvantage given that many of them were on the “wrong” side of the war. This is articulated most clearly in the film *Living in Fear* (*Sống trong Sợ hãi*, 2005), directed by Bùi Thạc Chuyên, that follows the postwar life of a southern Vietnamese soldier who has little choice but to provide for his family by collecting scrap metal from minefields. Today, the average scrap metal collector in Quảng Trị is male, 34 years old, with a mean monthly income from other work of US\$50. They typically invest around US\$20 into a metal detector, often imported from China, and collect an average of 16 kilograms of metal per day of work, which they then sell to a local dealer (Norwegian People’s Aid and Project Renew 2008: 50–4).²¹ Like the scavengers in Hanoi, scrap metal collecting and selling in Quảng Trị “typically draw on a rural labor force, appear as small-scale owner-operated enterprises, [and] are often characterized by hierarchical and dependent economic relationships” (DiGregorio 1995), in this case, between collector and dealer. Moreover, they also “carry a high degree of social opprobrium” (DiGregorio 1995). This is not only because of the legal ambiguity of their work — although scrap metal collection, including from bomb fragments, is not illegal per se, the unearthing, dismantling, and selling of UXO is. Rather, the stigma attached to scrap metal collectors has more to do with the risky nature of their work. Collectors appear to violate many of the shared values and ethical principles of risk that Mary Douglas saw as regulating conduct in the normative “risk culture” of a community.²² Collectors confront risk rather than avoid it. They turn a hazard into a potential (Zaloom 2004: 366). They profit from risk, and in the process they commodify it. As such, in Douglas’ terms, scrap metal collection becomes a form of social pollution that signifies a breakdown of the social and moral order.

Collectors are not the only segment of the population engaged in conduct considered to be high risk. Despite extensive mine risk education, children are still frequently the victims of UXO accidents. Between 2000 and 2005, playing with landmines accounted for 11 percent of all accidents in Quảng Trị, 64 percent of which involved children between nine and 11 years (Project Renew 2006: 28).²³ While these victims had access to risk

information, they were not always able to apply it. Unexploded ordnance can be difficult to identify and certain types of explosives may be mistaken for rocks or other natural debris, one NGO representative explained as we drove by the house of a family whose four-year-old son tragically died when his older brother innocently threw a small “stone” at him. Adults may also engage in risky behavior to protect their families and property. For example, they may dispose of UXO themselves by throwing unearthed explosives into adjacent ponds, which serve as a temporary safe holding area until demining units can remove them. The difference here, however, lies with intentionality. The child who mistook a grenade for a rock did not intend to throw an explosive at his brother, while the adult who tossed the explosive into the pond, albeit with great personal danger, intended to eliminate risk from the immediate environment. The scrap metal collector, on the other hand, challenges normative practices of avoidance through intentional engagement with risk, despite awareness of the dangers involved in such acts.²⁴ As such, when accidents do occur, there tends to be moral ambivalence about their state of victimhood. In the words of a Vietnamese representative of Clear Path International (CPI), a landmine survivor support organization:

CPI and MAG [Mines Advisory Group] condemn the dangerous economic pursuit of reclaiming wartime ordnance for resale as scrap metal, but some financially marginal Vietnamese families cannot resist the instant cash they can earn from their freelance activities. Although survivors such as Mr Nam [a now-disabled collector] aren't considered 'innocent' victims of unexploded ordnance accidents, their family members are. (Tran 2009)

Among the international demining community in Quảng Trị, scrap metal collectors are commonly referred to as “hobby” deminers,²⁵ a term that suggests a layperson involved in a *voluntary* activity done for recreation, rather than need. The following dialogue between the author, an NGO administrator, and an international demining technician reveals the particular social world that hobby deminers are thought to occupy and move through, one that is at odds with the moral, cultural, and technological order of their trained recruits.

NGO: Christina saw three men on the side of the road with their detectors this morning, and one guy was hammering away. Sounds to me like hobby demining.

- DT: If it was close to here, it could be our guys setting out the gridlines and hammering in a stake.
- CS: This was on the way to Trùng Sơn National Cemetery.
- DT: No, definitely not our guys. Must have been hobby demining.
- CS: What's that?
- DT: Those are guys with homemade detectors who don't have the training, and yes they lose people. They typically dig out the ordnance, remove the explosives to sell on the black market, and then sell the scrap metal to a dealer. It's a dangerous job.

Several insights can be gleaned from this brief exchange. First, in contrast to Vietnamese *professional* deminers who receive quality training by certified specialists, use high-tech, state-of-the-art equipment, and adhere to international safety standards and procedures, *hobby* deminers are thought to possess insufficient knowledge and inferior technology, and do not follow any standardized risk management practices. Their high accident and fatality rates, compared with the “zero percent rate” of professionals, further suggest a lack of safety awareness and adherence. Second, scrap metal collectors are not considered good moral citizens like their counterparts. Their illicit, profit-driven, self-serving activities in the underground economy conflict with the self-sacrificing work of deminers in the service of national defense and nation-building. In short, while the internationally-trained deminer works to protect and maintain the risk boundaries of the community, the scrap metal collector seems to defy them, paradoxically increasing the very threat (to self, family, and wider community) that the former strives to eliminate.

Mary Douglas' work on purity and danger (1966) is useful for understanding the social stigma attached to the risky behavior of scrap metal collectors and their trade in UXO. As abject matter out of place, explosive remnants of war are an enduring form of “pollution”; legally ambiguous, disruptive, and dangerous, they are the cause and the consequence of political, economic, moral, and social disorder. The picture of “hobby deminers” as reckless and naïve, and participating in an illegal trade, however, is far from complete. Collectors, too, have their own set of risk management strategies that they use to mitigate threat and maneuver safely in the hills. They are risk takers and makers, who set their own normative boundaries of a risk community (Lash 2000: 61). For example, experienced collectors tend to be well-versed in the different types of UXO and their perceived levels of risk, which in turn influences their collection practices. Cluster munitions are considered the most dangerous devices and tend to be left

alone, according to a study in Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên-Huế. 85 percent of those surveyed claim they do not touch or pick up ERW they believe to be hazardous; while close to 10 percent claim they report unsafe UXO to local authorities.²⁶ These negotiations with risk suggest that some collectors can be thought of as rational, rather than irresponsible, economic actors whose trade in risk is likewise based on particular calculations of probability.

Collectors have a different relationship to dominant notions of risk in Quảng Trị, one that is largely mediated by the vagaries of the market. As Caitlin Zaloom has argued, “Risk-taking actors and marketplaces are fundamental to contemporary economies.” (Zaloom 2004: 383). In capitalism, the lure of profit encourages and necessitates risk, and the possibility of gain may override the prospect of loss. Thus, despite the risks involved, scrap metal from the war offers collectors a chance to participate in, and potentially benefit from, a global economy that has otherwise left them behind. The new roads, economic zones, and trade centers have offered their families few financial opportunities to get ahead. As Richard Moyes (2004) has shown in his work on post-conflict Cambodia, scrap metal collection is fundamentally a global trade that “links impoverished rural communities to international markets” and resources.²⁷ However, as the following case study of a collector at Khe Sanh marine base shows, it is precisely this link to and encounter with the global market that makes scavenging and trading further suspect.

Recycled “Base Waste”: Risk and Contamination in the DMZ

Quảng Trị province is well-known in US public history for its protracted battles during the war and its strategic military bases. Positioned along Highway 9, just south of the DMZ, many US military installations were within firing range of northern artillery and subjected to regular attack from enemy forces. Bases including Camp Carroll, Khe Sanh, and Cồn Tiên were consequently dubbed “machines for killing Marines” on account of the heavy casualties suffered.²⁸ Highway 9 thus remains a deeply meaningful, almost sacred landscape in American memory of the war, and a priority destination for returning US veterans (Schwenkel 2009). As the number of tourists traveling to Vietnam rose steadily in the 1990s, local authorities embarked upon transforming the ruins of the region into a popular “DMZ tour.” Tourism to remote districts served to expand the scope of international trade in scrap metal far beyond neighboring Laos and China. As the DMZ became a landscape of commodified war memories, collectors

began to sell a new product — “base waste” or objects left behind by US forces — to new consumers: international tourists eager to participate in the war tourism industry.²⁹

Nestled among coffee trees in a new economic zone close to the Lao Bảo border crossing, Khe Sanh Combat Base is a highly anticipated stop on the tour.³⁰ As the site of one of the most decisive and debatable battles in US history of the war, it was also the most well-known in American popular memory. As Stanley Karnow pointed out, the protracted two-month battle and siege of Khe Sanh by enemy forces in 1968 was “daily fare for American television viewers” (Karnow 1983: 552). Over a period of nine weeks, more than 75,000 tons of bombs were dropped on enemy troops, “the deadliest deluge of firepower ever unloaded on a tactical target in the history of warfare” (Karnow 1983: 553).³¹ In the 1990s, little remained of the original base, except for traces of the original airstrip, scattered rounds of spent ammunition, and rusted scrap metal from US aircraft. “Don’t wander off the path,” tour guides warned groups of European and American visitors in the early years of the tour, pointing to the threat of lurking landmines and the need to comply with a particular code of “risk avoidance” conduct when touring the area.

In fall of 1999, a western tourist in Hué, where the 12-hour DMZ tour began, offered me the following advice: “Do not go to Khe Sanh. It’s not worth it. It’s just a piece of flat, red land. Nothing is left except for some kids selling fake war relics.” This quote is significant for several reasons. First is the idea that former US bases, including Khe Sanh are largely empty of historical signifiers. That is, there are no visible signs of the war left to keep the past alive and tangible in the present. As landscapes have healed — now fertile with pepper, rubber, and coffee — the certainty of the past is much less clear. Artifacts of war thus serve as mnemonic devices that bridge the gap between then and now. As David Lowenthal has argued, “Memory and history both derive and gain emphasis from physical remains. Tangible survivals provide a vivid immediacy that helps to assure us there really was a past” (Lowenthal 1985: xxiii). But these survivals, as the tourist in Hué expressed, engender much suspicion about origin and authenticity, and the life history they are assumed to possess. Most importantly, the tourist’s word of caution reveals the ambivalent relationship that exists between consumer and vendor, between the international tourist and the scrap metal collector who converts past trauma (the soldier’s biography) and present risk (the process of scavenging) into a market commodity.

Each day when tour buses pulled in to Khe Sanh, a small group of vendors hurriedly approached visitors and followed them as they explored the grounds of the former marine base. In the wooden boxes they carried, collectors displayed exhumed “base waste” left behind by US troops, including razors, forks, spoons, coins, bullet casings, medals, pins, lighters, compasses, and dog tags. One young couple I first met in 1998 had been selling base waste to tourists since the mid-1990s.³² Scrap metal collection and resale at Khe Sanh was their primary means of economic survival and they continued this trade for another decade, even with the decline in supply and demand.³³ Armed with a metal detector and a simple tool to excavate objects, the husband scavenged the hills of Hường Hóa District around Khe Sanh, sometimes in the company of other collectors. Like professional demining, collective scavenging was an important strategy to reduce the strong probability of risk.

Though the market was tightly controlled — not just anyone could show up at Khe Sanh and peddle souvenirs — there was the potential to earn higher profits by selling scrap-metal-cum-war-relics to tourists, rather than to dealers. This is because the meaning and value attached to the objects differed considerably. Relics from the base were not scrap metal whose value could be calculated according to substance and weight. For example, in 1998 I purchased a PAVN medal from the couple for 10,000 đồng (US\$0.70). At that time, a collector would need to scavenge around five kilograms of metal to earn that amount, and yet my purchase did not even weigh 100 grams. Much of what the collectors exhumed and sold at Khe Sanh would be of little worth if traded individually with the dealers; the scales of measure in the recycled metal industry (“mass” and “bulk”) necessitated the loss of individual form and meaning. To be profitable, scrap metal needs to be accumulated, not individuated. Consequently, when trading with a dealer, the specific life history of an object is irrelevant, and subsequently, so is the question of its authenticity (Appadurai 1986).

In the tourism industry, however, it is precisely this history that endowed an object with power and value, transforming “scrap” into a fetish, a commodity, a meaningful souvenir. Like trench art,³⁴ the war relic served to mediate between the living and the dead, transmitting sentiment from the past into the present. If the aura of this history was lacking or somehow unconvincing — the fork was too polished or the razor too sharp — the object was disconnected from its presumed biography and labeled “a fake.” The vendors were aware of the importance of this visual economy of authenticity — more value was attached to the rusted and misshapen



Plate 5.1 War scrap metal collector, Khe Sanh, 2004 (Photo courtesy of Christina Schwenkel).

dog tag than the polished fork, for example. They were also acutely aware of the ambivalent feelings that international tourists had for their commodities. The relics were desired and yet despised. Tourists were enchanted by them, but also repulsed. They liked to look, but did not often buy. “*Không bán nhiều!*” [Not much sold!], one vendor lamented in 2004 after a tour bus drove away.

Elsewhere, I have referred to re-commodified objects that US soldiers disposed of or unintentionally left behind as “souvenirs of death,” (Schwenkel 2009: 87) borrowing from the work of Susan Stewart (1993). As an abject object infused with affective power and potency,³⁵ the “souvenir of death” at Khe Sanh was considered by many tourists to be polluted and taboo. Its abjection placed it firmly outside the moral and symbolic order of “proper” collection and consumption practices (Kristeva 1982). For Mary Douglas (1966), pollution occupies a liminal and highly ambiguous social position as both dangerous and powerful, attracting and repelling. However, it was not the suggestion of a violent past and the implied fate of the soldier who once possessed the object that made it impure and abject. Indeed, it was precisely the artifact’s connection to

trauma and death that lured the viewer to gaze in the first place (“Keep walking,” a father urged his young son who paused to look in 2000). As the work of social theorists has long shown, there is no shortage of interest in, or western cultural taboo against, the commodification and consumption of trauma and suffering.³⁶

What then made the war relic contaminated? At Khe Sanh, tourists were not merely uneasy with the aura of death that haunted the landscape and imbued the unearthed objects. In their wider travels, many had avidly sought out the violent histories and legacies of war; trauma tourism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam remains a key attraction. Rather than death, the source of contamination was linked to unorthodox practices of risk and their entanglements with the market. These were not accidental souvenirs; the collectors actively broke with normative, risk-aversion conduct to excavate and sell the relics, turning risk into commodity and profit. Commodification, of both risk and its found object, tainted the encounter between vendor and consumer. On tours, foreigners expressed their discomfort with paying for the scavenged souvenirs; many considered the trade, and by extension the vendors, to be unscrupulous. The relics were thought of as intimate objects used in daily ritual activities (eating, shaving, etc.); they had unknown but assumed individual biographies. To engage in risk-driven market exchange, and to further encourage the industry, would be to defile this history and contaminate memory. In the highly moral risk economy that the tourists subscribed to, relics were pure and untainted if found fortuitously rather than purchased intentionally, and thus productive of profit. Consequently, there was no condemnation of a self-proclaimed “war buff” when he disregarded the risks to wander off the airstrip, pick up a shattered marine helmet, and excitedly declare, “I’m taking this with me!”

Conclusion: Intersecting Risk Cultures in Quảng Trị

After more than forty years, only now returning to Tà Con. Youth volunteers from Đồng Trạch commune, Bồ Trạch district, Quảng Bình province who worked and fought to build the Trường Sơn road [Ho Chi Minh Trail] have now come back to visit. No more enemies, just historical vestiges. Changed scenery, different sights than forty years ago. Proud that the Fatherland swept the nation clean of enemies. Re-built landscapes; new economic zones rising from lands once occupied by the US military. A mix of emotions — both joy and sadness: So long heroic martyrs who sacrificed your lives for the nation on this very soil.

— 14 April 2010 entry in Impression Book at Khe Sanh Museum

How does a landscape “heal”? Can wounded landscapes fully recover from the destructive forces of a violent war? New roads, homes, forests, buildings and markets suggest that regeneration and renewal are well underway in Quảng Trị, yet freshly-dug holes in the hills along Highway 9 tell a more complicated story. Like the comments in the Impression Book at Khe Sanh, these new wounds also remind us to think more critically about celebrated narratives of growth, to consider what lies behind or literally beneath the rebuilt landscapes (UXO, base waste, corporeal remains), the changing scenery, and the economic prosperity.

There is no uniform way that people rebuild their lives and landscapes in the aftermath of war. As this chapter has shown, new business and professional opportunities emerged in postwar Quảng Trị as a consequence of lingering, hazardous, imperial debris that has also claimed the lives of thousands of residents. Deminers, scrap metal collectors, international trainers, NGO officers, tour guides, tourists — all have contributed in unique ways to reshaping postwar economic, social and memorial landscapes that continue to pose a threat to the public. As demonstrated above, these groups of actors maneuvered within very different, if not competing, moral economies of risk, at times intersecting and other times colliding. Yet risk not only revealed itself to be a purely destructive force, its productivity should also be noted: new alliances, subjectivities, and socio-spatial relations all point to the “productive life of risk” (Zaloom 2004) at work in Quảng Trị.

In recent years, there have been notable efforts to encourage more productive collaborations between the different groups involved in clearing the landscape of war debris — namely, between “professional” and “hobby” deminers. NGO and governmental institutions have begun to reach out to scrap metal collectors to involve them in programs that recognize and make use of their localized knowledge for the betterment of society. Experienced scrap metal collectors, for example, have significant knowledge of munitions and of Quảng Trị’s geography and history, perhaps more so than young recruits and international specialists. Recruitment of trainees from the families of UXO victims is another humanitarian gesture meant to integrate stigmatized community members into the formal (and thus “legitimate”) economy. Though in their infancy, such programs can play an active role in providing a stable and safer employment for scrap metal collectors, while reducing the negative connotations attached to their trade. At the same time, such programs may also lead to new forms of regulation of the industry that might allow for less rigid moral boundaries around emerging cultures of risk and their risk management strategies.

Notes

1. The field of UXO detection and removal has been remarkably transnational since the founding of the Technology Centre for Bomb and Mine Disposal (BOMICEN) in 1996 under the Ministry of National Defense. International cooperation with humanitarian and governmental organizations, as well as global corporations from Germany, Norway, England, Australia, China and the United States have contributed new technologies, risk assessment strategies, and knowledge practices to national demining efforts, which have also served to strengthen bilateral relations, particularly in the case of the United States where such cooperation has been key to the process of reconciliation.
2. “War Ordnance Kills 437 in Central Việt Nam in Last Five Years,” *Việt Nam News*, 1 Aug. 2009, p. 3.
3. See, for example, BOMICEN and VVAF (2009); and Project Renew (2006).
4. “Quảng Trị to Enhance Use of East-West Economic Corridor,” *Việt Nam News*, 8 Aug. 2009, p. 2.
5. In the last ten years, for example, the Lao Bảo special economic-commercial zone [Khu Kinh tế Thương mại Đặc biệt Lao Bảo] has attracted 41 projects with a total capital investment of more than 3.1 trillion Vietnamese đồng (US\$187 million), contributing approximately 30% of the provincial budget (Dương Vương Lợi 2010). State-established new economic zones focus on the agricultural production of cash crops that include coffee, rubber and cassava. Lao Bảo is also the busiest international border crossing with Laos.
6. Images and objects from the exhibit, “Highway 9: Opportunities and Challenges” (Đường 9: Cơ hội và Thách thức), which ran from June to Oct. 2009, can be viewed online at http://www.vme.org.vn/exhibitions_special_details.asp?ID=61
7. Like Giddens, Ulrich Beck (1992), who coined the term “risk society,” also sought to produce a globally applicable theory of risk that could best capture the essence of capitalist modernity in western societies.
8. See also Lash (2000).
9. Caplan (2000); Lash (2000); Boholm (2001).
10. The term “matter out of place” was originally coined by Mary Douglas (1966) in her classic text, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.
11. Interview with Development & Public Affairs Officer, Project RENEW, Đông Hà town, Quảng Trị, July 2009.
12. The administrative borders of Quảng Trị have since shifted. Before 1975, Quảng Trị was the northernmost province of the Republic of Vietnam. After the war, its expanded to incorporate areas of Quảng Bình (the southernmost province in former “North Vietnam”) into its administrative jurisdiction.
13. In a survey conducted by BOMICEN and VVAF of six heavily impacted provinces, Quảng Trị had the highest percentage of contaminated bomb and

- mine areas (83.8%), followed by Quảng Ngãi at 52.7% (BOMICEN and VVAF 2009: 40).
14. To again cite the BOMICEN and VVAF study, Quảng Trị had the highest number of landmine and UXO victims in the six surveyed provinces, with 361 accidents — 158 of which resulted in death — between 2003 and 2008 (BOMICEN and VVAF 2009: 53). An earlier study conducted by Project Renew with the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Health in Quảng Trị provides more detailed statistics on landmine casualties in relation to gender, age, occupation, education and ethnicity (Project Renew 2006: 16–21).
 15. For example, members of the “suicide unit” (*đội tự tử*) were responsible for such work. After their defusal, bombs were typically pried open and the explosives removed to be recycled and used in self-made weapons. Such skill and labor also played a central role in guerrilla combat strategies in southern Vietnam, as the photographer Dương Thanh Phong documented in the book, *The Documentary Album of Cu Chi 1960–1975, Album no. 2* (Khu di tích lịch sử địa đạo Củ Chi 2002).
 16. The smallest currency on the market at that time of my visit was a 200-đồng note.
 17. This is based on estimates that farmers typically till less than a third of a meter of land during cultivation.
 18. For more on these projects as healing practices, see Schwenkel (2009: 38–45).
 19. The total numbers of victims per year decreased from 214 in 1990 to 134 in 1995 to 57 in 2001 and 49 in 2005 (Project Renew *et al.* 2006: 61–2).
 20. On Vietnam, see Norwegian People’s Aid and Project Renew 2008; on Laos, see Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining 2005; on Cambodia see Moyes 2004 for Handicap International, Belgium, Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and Norwegian People’s Aid.
 21. Poorer collectors may make their own homemade detectors.
 22. Douglas (1990, 1992)
 23. Between 1975 and 2008, 31% of all UXO fatalities in the province were children.
 24. According to Norwegian People’s Aid and Project Renew, 93.76% of collectors have been exposed to mine risk education (Norwegian People’s Aid and Project Renew 2008: 55).
 25. For example, see Patt (2000) and Bensinger (2003).
 26. Norwegian People’s Aid and Project Renew (2008), pp. 59, 99. See also Geneva (2005), pp. 31–2 for similar findings in Laos.
 27. Cited in Geneva (2005: 12–3).
 28. “Border Recessional: The Return of Con Thien,” *Time*, 19 July 1971, at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,905360-1,00.html> [accessed 14 Feb. 2013].
 29. On this industry in southern Vietnam, see Schwenkel (2006) and Alneng (2002).

30. In Vietnamese memory, Khe Sanh is referred to as Sân bay Tà Côn, or Tà Côn airport. Thus, while international tourists visit “Khe Sanh,” domestic tourists go to “Sân bay Tà Côn.”
31. Karnow reports a death rate of less than 500 for US troops and more than 10,000 PAVN forces (ibid.). Though active in the battle, the number of ARVN combatants killed in action at Khe Sanh is not provided.
32. When we first met in 1998, I took their picture at the couple’s request; in return, they presented me with a gift: an old French coin found on the premises, a tribute to the layered histories of empire-building along Highway 9, a former colonial road that linked Annam with Laos. The following year, I returned with the photograph, and an article on the vendors published in the *Los Angeles Times* (Lamb 1999). Through the irony of their market activity — the commodification of imperial debris under late socialism — they had achieved international notoriety.
33. “Base waste” is of course exhaustible. As of 2010, the husband was still selling war relics at Khe Sanh, though he had incorporated into his display mass-produced souvenirs sold across the country, such as Chinese-made Zippo lighters meant to mimic originals from the war. The wife had passed away after a brief illness.
34. See Saunders (2003).
35. See also Krisna Uk’s chapter in this volume.
36. See Feldman (2005); Sontag (2003); Boltanski (1999); Kleinman and Klenman (1997).