

# Find leaves Siem Reap shell-shocked

ROGER MITTON

PETER Willers conveys the air of an upright and efficient soldier. He is actually a retired colonel from the German Army, but his past 18 months of "retirement" in Cambodia have not been quiet and relaxed. In fact, he has been extremely busy. That's because he is the project manager of the Cambodian Mine Action Centre's Demining Unit 6 based on the outskirts of Siem Reap.

His unit, which is on call 24 hours a day, is tasked with deactivating unexploded weapons like mortars, mines, tank shells and bombs in Siem Reap and Oddar Meanchey provinces. Last week, he received an urgent call from Siem Reap police, who had been alerted by men doing road work on the town's main thoroughfare, Sivutha Boulevard.

## Ordnance unearthed

The interminable road works, which have caused hassles for everyone trying to get around Siem Reap, are ostensibly being conducted to clear refuse and other material blocking the town's large underground water drainage pipes. But on this occasion, the workers found something unexpected in the pipes: a large artillery shell. They immediately stopped work and called Willers's bomb disposal unit.

The German colonel and his Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team promptly swung into action. The shell was located smack in the middle of Siem Reap, the epicentre of Cambodia's tourist industry, just metres from popular hotels and restaurants.

As sledge was pumped from the hole into an adjacent tanker, one of the EOD specialists climbed down to inspect the shell.

It turned out to be a prime condition American 105mm artillery shell, almost half a metre



ROGER MITTON

long, packed full of TNT and weighing 40kgs. And its fuse was still active, meaning that if it were struck by an earthmover or piledriver, it could explode with devastating consequences.

That was horrifying enough. But no sooner had the specialist managed to manoeuvre the shell into a bucket and have it hauled out of the hole, than he discovered another shell, and then another. An astonishing eight shells were found, comprising a total of about 150 kilograms of potentially active TNT - enough to cause catastrophic damage to the centre of Siem Reap and cause untold death and damage.

Observers were literally shell-shocked by the discovery. Traffic on Sivutha Boulevard was halted. Willers said that if this amount of un-

exploded ordnance had been found in Europe, the centre of most towns would have been evacuated.

The eight shells were handled warily by the EOD unit. Said Willers: "When you are dealing with unexploded weapons, it is always dangerous. Fortunately, these shells had not been fired so they were not quite as dangerous as exploded shells that have been fired but didn't explode."

The shells were later detonated at an isolated location. "We had to use five kilograms of our own explosives to blow them all up," said Willers.

Four days later, another shell was found on the same stretch of street. Said Colonel Mean

Sann, one of Willers's colleagues at DU6: "It is the first time that we have ever found explosives in the town centre. But it is quite possible that more shells remain in the drainage system. We find them regularly in outlying areas of the town and in the province as a whole."

## Deadly legacy

Last month, the unit found 1,580 unexploded remnants in Siem Reap and Oddar Meanchey provinces, with 361 items being found in Siem Reap.

"We are finding about 1,000 unexploded shells and mines and bombs every month," said Willers, whose DU6 unit has 330 deminers and specialists under its command. The explosive disposal project is financed by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

How did all these prime condition American shells arrive under Siem Reap centre? Willers surmised that they were probably given to the US-backed military regime of General Lon Nol in the early 1970s. Then, as the Khmer Rouge forces later began to take over, local military or civilians, fearing the weapons would fall into the hands of the Khmer Rouge, likely hid them in the underground pipes.

Said retired British businessman Christopher Smith, a local resident: "Given Cambodia's recent history, it doesn't really surprise me that they found these explosives under Sivutha Boulevard. In fact, I'm surprised more explosives aren't found."

Cambodia is a signatory to the 1999 Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty and is committed to remove all mines within 10 years. But that goal will not be met and the government has asked for another decade to do the job.

"It is unlikely to remove all the mines even by then," said Willers. "Remember, Cambodia is the third most mined nation on earth, after Afghanistan and Angola."