HORRIFIC WEAPON OF WAR IS STILL DESTROYING LIVES

By Mike Felker

March 27 newspaper headline: "Four American soldiers killed by Afghan land mine."

It was with a heavy heart and sad memories that I read of the four U.S. soldiers who fell victim to a land mine in Afghanistan last month. I never thought that more than three decades after my experience with land mines in Vietnam the devastation would be continuing.

In 1968, as an 18-year-old training to be a Navy medic at the Naval Hospital Corps School in Great Lakes, Ill., the first patient I cared for was a 20-year-old Marine whose left leg was blown off below the knee by a land mine in Vietnam. I helped change his bloody dressing and clean the wound, and gave him medications to fight the pain and infection.

A year later, I was sent to a Marine infantry unit in Vietnam. There, I replaced a medic who had been killed by a land mine.

While working as a medic with the First Marine Division south of Da Nang and in the mountains on the Vietnamese/Laothian border, I administered first aid to Americans and Vietnamese wounded by land mines. Most of these casualties were injured by mines nicknamed "toepoppers" - devices meant to blow off a person's foot. Depending on the magnitude of the explosive, this sort of land mine could destroy not only a foot, but part of the leg - tissue, bones, and muscles could be destroyed and nerves severed.

With horrific force, fragments of the weapon, along with debris, dirt, and bone splinters, would be thrust into the stump and other parts of the body. I'd tie a tourniquet around the remains of the leg, wrap a battle dressing over the stump, start an intravenous solution of plasma, and give the wounded man a shot of morphine while waiting for a medical helicopter to arrive.

I and other medics once tried to save a Marine who had the top of his head blown off by a mine that had been placed in a tree. He died.

One-third of all American casualties in Vietnam were caused by mines. Retired U.S. military officers have decried the use of land mines, noting that they have minimal military utility and often maim or kill friendly forces.

My concern about land mines has led me to become active with the Philadelphia chapters of Veterans for Peace and the United Nations Association. These groups have been raising money to support de-mining efforts in Afghanistan through the United Nations' Adopt-A-Minefield Program (www.landmines.org). Members raise awareness of the issue by meeting with local groups.

Last fall, I spoke about land mines during a presentation at Bodine High School for International Relations, and this year I was a member of a veterans panel as part of One Book, One Philadelphia's discussion of writer Tim O'Brien's novel, The Things They Carried. For several years, I also have participated in the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial Run, which begins at the memorial on Columbus Boulevard.

Today, thousands of people - military personnel and civilians - still are being killed or injured by land mines. Iraq and Afghanistan are two countries that are heavily mined, but there are an estimated 45
million to 50 million land mines in nearly 70 countries.

All weapons of war are evil, but land mines are particularly so. They can stay buried for years, wreaking carnage long after hostilities have ended. Land mines also are indiscriminate weapons; they do not distinguish between a soldier’s or a child’s footstep.

Children are particularly vulnerable because they are smaller and their body mass is closer to the impact of a mine. In many developing countries there is little treatment or care available for land mine victims, even children.

I am among those people who feel it is imperative that the United States join the more than 150 countries that support the International Mine Ban treaty, which prohibits the use and production of land mines.

These deadly weapons cost as little as $3 to produce, but the damage they cause is much more expensive. Transportation to medical aid and treatment in countries where they are located is very slow and limited, and wound infections take a high toll.

Rehabilitation capabilities and the availability of prosthetics fall far short of the demand. It costs between $100 and $3,000 to provide an artificial limb for land mine survivors, a purchase out of reach for many of those affected. A child who loses an arm or leg to a booby trap needs a new prosthetic every six months to adjust to his or her growing body.

While it costs between $300 and $1,000 to locate and destroy a single mine, the work is very dangerous, complex and time-consuming. It is costing billions of dollars to remove land mines already in place.

When we use our resources to remove land mines, we are working to remove suffering, fear and impoverishment. We are working against the horrors of war and towards building a safer world for all citizens. Isn't that something we can all support?

Mike Felker lives and writes in Philadelphia.