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Busting A Taliban Bomb-Making Cell



Text & Photos by Paul Avalone

For the past five months SCF has detailed ODA 2025's raids on weapons caches and heroin-processing labs, as well as the team's non-combat role winning hearts and minds. The ODA's adventures continue now, as the team learns there's a Taliban bomb-making cell in town ... with the ODA the target.

We'd gotten intel from a local source that a Taliban cell had come into the city, three, four — maybe a dozen men — and they had made some improvised bombs. Propane tanks rigged with explosives, the word was ... meant for us.

Similar to barbecue tanks in the States, except a little smaller and painted shiny red, blue, gold or green, and used

With SF In Afghanistan



extensively in the place of stoves for cooking, these tanks were to be first strapped to the backs of bicycles, the usual method of delivering them. Then the bikes would be casually left on the alley on which we lived, and when we came or went in our Toyota Tacoma 4WD pickups, they would be detonated by remote radio signal. Ten to 12 guys split between three Tacomas ... it would make for a bad day for SF.

It was just after dawn, and we had about a third of our 90-plus MRF (our Mobile Reaction Force and pronounced

"murf" — our personal Afghan militia) lingering with us outside one of their two compounds in and around our Tacomas and their Toyota HiLux diesel pickups. We were waiting for the last piece of intel: The cell's location.

Our MRF were a collection of the better soldiers culled from the various local generals'/warlords' armies. (Generals, warlords — they're one in the same.) We paid our guys well (double or triple the average Afghan monthly income), fed them three meals a day, equipped them



from clothes to weapons to crates of ammo, and trained them as our muscle.

It was our 30-odd MRF and us, and the two audacious Norwegian documentary filmmakers who'd showed up in town a couple of days earlier and had gotten the local kingpin warlord, General Hazarat Ali, the Eastern Corps commander with whom we worked, to give them permission to go wherever and film whatever they wanted. They had Ali's blessings, and we, consequently, were powerless to run them off or shoot them.

It was light by now, later than we liked to hit places. Much better to catch people still sleeping. The element of surprise was evaporating with each minute. Our team sergeant, Terry, and one of our medics, Laval, were in a confab with an Afghan man whom I did not recognize. The source.

Intel-gathering with sources was Laval's gig, and no one did it better. A former sergeant in 5th Special Forces Group, Laval had left active duty, transferring to the Guard to pursue a normal life with his wife and two kids, moving the family from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, to West Texas, where he was the foreman on a huge cattle ranch when we were activated after 9/11. With so much CenCom/Mideast experience under his belt from his time in 5th Group, Laval had taken to the Afghan culture upon setting foot in the country and had developed a network of sources that was unrivaled.

That ain't bragging — it's fact. During our seven months in Afghanistan, our team uncovered and captured more arms caches, in numbers and tonnage, and snatched more Taliban/al Qaeda operatives and busted up more opium/heroin rings than any of the other SF teams. Hands down. And it wasn't because we were braver than the other guys. Or smarter. Or tougher. It was because we had better intel; intel not from CIA, NSA or DIA sources or satellite imagery or radio intercepts; rather, human intel from ground-level sources. Afghans. Average-Mohammed everyday Afghans. Laval's network.

His name was becoming legend among special ops in country, as much from our successes as from the CIA spooks, Delta boys and SEAL operatives who came in and out of our area and wound up spreading the word. We'd even heard rumors to the effect that Laval's name had been mentioned in briefings more than once in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. And even in the White House.

"... Careers Aren't Made By Approving Risky Operations That Go South."

No matter. Right now team leader Captain Jim was on the satellite radio with our command base up in Uzbekistan, appraising them of the situation, but careful to make it all sound quite routine and not dangerous. The intel had come in quickly and we had not submitted to higher a detailed written conop (Concept of Operation), and if the brass thought the potential for casualties too high, they'd order us off. Nowadays, careers aren't made by approving risky operations that go south.

At the same time, our Air Force Tac-P attached to the ODA at the time, Chief Harris, was on his satellite radio with his liaison at the Combined Joint Special Ops Task Force (CJSOTF) at Bagram Air Base north of Kabul, finding out what close air support was available just in case we hit some heavy resistance. With our M-4s, Beretta 9mms, Tacoma-mounted M-240 machine guns and our MRF with their AKs, PKs and RPGs, we could put out plenty of firepower ourselves. But there was nothing like knowing you have F-15s and A-10s at your beck-and-call, to come screaming out of the sky with their overwhelming weaponry, blasting absolute terror into the hearts of the enemy.

For the SF teams on the ground the Tac-Ps had become indispensable. Their radios were better than ours for talking to aircraft, they knew the lingo and procedures better, and the pilots liked having one of their Air Force own on the ground. Plus, the Tac-P presence freed up one of our guys from being glued to the radio.

Suddenly, there was a buzz among us, "We've got the location." "Where?" Laval's source had come through. "Over there." Just on the other side of the MRF compound. The walled compound behind. Within sight. Not more than a quarter-mile straight-line distance. "Damn ... !"

"Think they've seen us?" someone asked. If they were looking, they couldn't miss 50 armed men hanging around a formation of gunned-up Toyota pickups. "Yeah," someone suggested, "but what says they know we're here for them?" It was a hope more than a question.

It didn't matter, we had to take them down, surprise or no surprise. If the bombs were still there, they could be moved



(from far left) Surprised by the early-morning raid, the suspect exits the house in his barefeet, only to be met by MRF squad leader Sefuidin. Refusing to put down his weapon, the suspect backs away. MRF squad leader Sefuidin approaches the suspect in a Mexican standoff with the guns of the ODA and MRF trained on the him. Suspect still refuses to drop his weapon. Defying the MRF and ignoring the (off camera) aimed guns of the ODA, the suspect backs away toward the rooms behind him into which he will eventually step, disappearing.



SFC Laval and SFC Deke train their M-4 rifles on the (off camera) suspect as he disappears in the rooms along the edge of the compound.

(from left) As a 2nd suspect exits the house, MRF squad leader Sefuidin, not willing to tolerate a second man getting away, directly and physically confronts the suspect. The photo does not show it, but Sefuidin has grabbed the 2nd suspect's AK by the muzzle and now is about to bring his own AK down on the suspect's head, hitting him with the end of the AK magazine. Having clobbered the suspect on the skull, Sefuidin yanks the suspect's AK right from his hand, muzzle first. Staff Sergeant Dean wrestles the 2nd suspect to the ground while MRF come to his aid and Captain Brian reaches behind his back for flexcuffs.



within minutes. No, they would be moved, without doubt. We had no choice — we had to strike now, no delay.

A plan was quickly drawn up. No diagrams, no sand tables. What could we draw? We had no idea what was inside the compound. It was big, we could tell — about the size of a football field. Above, behind the walls one could see trees, lots of them. There was no time to put eyes-on and get the lay of the target. What was the layout inside, who knows? How many separate little houses and rooms in there, who knows?

How many men, who knows? Where would the bombs be, who knows? What kind of resistance would we meet, who knows? Would there be women and children whom we'd have to be careful not to harm? Who knows?

All we knew, the source said that the entrance was down the cross street ahead. So, we'd mount-up — MRFs and our gunners manning the PKs and our M-240s on the back of the pickups. Two MRF trucks in the lead and the rest interspersed with ours, we'd speed to the cross street then down it, and the

SSG Dean maintains his weight on the suspect, still aiming at the potential threat from inside the house, as a MRF flexcuffs the suspect. Note the blood on the suspect from where Sefuidin slammed the magazine of his AK on the suspect's head.



two lead MRF trucks would swing into security positions at the near and far corners of the compound on the street and act as blocking positions. Our demolition guys, Chuck and Deke, would be in our lead truck, first to the entrance that was most likely twin 12-foot-tall iron gates chained shut, and they would blow them open with shape charges.

"You got radio contact with CAS?" Captain Jim asked Chief Harris of the close air support. He did.

"Where do you want us?" Rob asked. "Want us to play the message?" Rob was the sergeant of the three-man Tactical Psyop Team (TPT) permanently attached to our ODA while in country. Reservists from the Atlanta, Georgia area, Rob, Jason and Travis were more than happy to be away from the conventional structure of their unit, living and working hand-in-hand with an actual SF team in a combat zone. They had mounted two big loudspeakers atop their Toyota Surf 4-Runner and could play messages or music recorded on their MP-3 players. If we were hitting a target mounted, we'd have TPT repeatedly blast one of several messages that basically said in the native language, Pashtu, "Attention, attention! We are American and Afghan forces. Set down your weapons. Have the women and children gather in the center of the compound."

"Got Your Body Armor With You?"

TPT were to be the last vehicle this morning, just ahead of the Norwegians in their Land Cruiser. As soon as the gates were to be blown, we'd all storm in on foot and the TPT would start the message blasting. "Drop your weapons. You will not be harmed." As it happened, when things would quickly start to go wrong this day, TPT would prove to be more than just mere disc jockeys.

Terry and Captain Jim got the MRF squad leaders together and through our interpreters ("terps") Gulbarhar and Fahreed laid out the complete plan.

"Got your body armor with you?" team sergeant Terry asked me. "In the truck." "Maybe you oughta get it on," he advised. I hated the body armor. It's cumbersome, bulky and heavy. Our MRF didn't have body armor or helmets. Our terps either. We didn't have the extras to give them, and I doubt that they'd use them if we had. It's a pride, macho thing.

Actually, the odds on a daily basis of getting shot at were slim, maybe just five percent. And the chances of them actu-

ally hitting you if they did shoot, the majority being lousy shots, was maybe five percent. Five percent of five percent, I'd take those odds, especially since, with the extensive vehicular movement required to cover our huge province, our greatest everyday danger was landmines and IEDs, from which the body armor provided little or no protection. I had taken to never wearing the stuff, but right now Captain Jim gave me a look — you know, saying, please get your armor on. If I got shot in the chest or back it would be his ass fried for not making me wear it. I put it on.

The helmets, now, that was a different story. All of us had taken to not wearing them. Period. Screw the directives coming down saying we had to. The helmets are uncomfortable, they don't really protect that much and, most importantly, they just don't look cool. It was baseball caps all around. Combine that with the fact that the conventional troops — 82nd, 10th Mountain and 101st — followed directives and wore their helmets all the time, and, though none were in our area at the time, they had been earlier in the war, the populace didn't like them. Not them or their Humvees, or their clean-shaved faces and high-and-tight haircuts. Nor that they operated coldly, as an occupying force. The locals referred to the conventional soldiers simply as, in Pashtu, "the helmeted ones." Frowning. We were a small team whose survival depended upon its ability to blend in and build rapport with the populace, and the last thing we wanted to be referred to was "helmeted ones."

We let our hair grow and beards, ignoring dictates from the conventional general commanding the Afghan theater. We wore Afghan scarves that doubled as dust masks for the hours and hours of driving on the dirt roads and rutted paths of the rural countryside. We wore DCUs or the woodland-green BDUs (like our MRF) and sometimes jeans. Laval and anyone joining him on a clandestine meeting or recon wore the local garb — what we called "hajji-flage" — the pajama-like pants and long shirt, down to the cheap shoes, and a wrap blanket in the cold. ("Hajji" — pronounced há-gee — is the formal first name given an Afghan man who has visited Mecca, and GIs use it as a catch-all moniker for all Afghans.)

Regardless of the command orders, SF guys were going to

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do what they wanted to do—wear the body armor and helmets or not. No one was coming out and checking on us, anyway. Hell, if they did and got all pissed, the general refrain was, “What are they going to do, send us home?”

Not a minute to waste now that we had our location, we mounted our Toyota trucks. And moved out. Speeding now, in Ranger file, accelerators floored, heading right for the compound. The lead truck turned ... into the compound's entrance, where the gates were open, wide open. The second followed. Whoa, I thought, aren't those first two MRF trucks supposed to be our security? Too late, everyone was following ... into the compound.

The place was huge and open inside here, and no one was out, no one knew we were coming, or there was no one here. A piece of cake, a walk in the park. There were some buildings in the middle and some along the walls. Fruit trees and palms. And still no one was out, as the trucks followed the lead down the dirt drive, turning now, and from behind came TPT's loudspeakers blasting in Pashtu, “Attention, attention!”

The MRF were jumping off and climbing out of their pickups to burst out in all directions at random, as their general assignment was to always

secure a perimeter. Ahead, Deke and Chuck were out of their truck, Laval, Terry and Captain Jim theirs, and “Women and children gather in the center of the compound,” was blasting from TPT's loudspeakers somewhere behind. Then there was shouting from the building just ahead, and our MRF started



The homemade bombs and detonation devices. The propane tanks contained plastic explosives, nails and screws. The yellow “sweet” boxes disguise bombs made of plastic explosive in wooden boxes. With the bombs were cell phones, power sources and a phone answering machine switchboard—all for use to remote detonate the bombs.

yelling—everything in Pashtu—then a man was coming out of the building, AK swinging in his hands, with shouts following him from the building, meaning there were men in there who most likely were, like this guy, armed.

Some of our MRF were caught in the open, near the guy, while we ducked behind the trucks, weapons aimed on the man, yelling to our terps to tell the man to drop the AK, while he kept sidestepping, backing away, swinging his AK toward us then toward the two MRF who were approaching him, yelling at him.

It was a Mexican standoff in the truest sense, except that we had at least a dozen weapons aimed on the guy and could have blown him away. And, by all accounts, should have. Except, we still didn't know how many there were in both the building behind us now and in the rooms along the wall to where the guy was backing away.

Yelling and shouting is one thing, a shot is something else. It can initiate a firefight. One shot, two, a dozen, and all hell was probably going to break loose from those buildings. And guys would go down, plain and simple. We'd win, to be sure, but losing a guy or two and at least a few of our MRF wouldn't be a good win.

We shouted to our terps to tell our MRF “Don't fire! Tell him to put his weapon down! Don't fire!” And the guy waltzed to the rooms where other men now appeared, and they were weaponless, so firing at the guy would now surely

take-down unarmed men too. The guy disappeared.

More shouts came now from behind, from the same building, as another man was coming out, he too with an AK, figuring, most likely, he'd make the same getaway. But one of our MRF squad leaders, Sefuidin, was right there, and he'd had enough of it. He grabbed the guy's AK right by the muzzle—and why the guy didn't shoot him in the belly is anyone's guess. Then Sefuidin brought his own AK down on the guy's skull and yanked the AK from him then shoved him aside where our weapon's sergeant, Dean, clamped him to the ground, secure, with his knees to his back.

(below, from left) SFC Randy maintains control of the suspect while the ODA and MRF secure the compound. SFC Laval and SFC Deke neutralize the threat of a suspect during their securing of the compound before the search for the homemade bombs could begin. SSG Dean leads suspects to a secure holding area in the compound.



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Our terps relayed to us that the men remaining in the building were yelling that they were innocent and for us not to shoot. “Throw your weapons out,” they were ordered. AKs clattered to the concrete outside the door. So far, so good. Then again, the best laid plans ... or, in our case, the most hastily laid plans. Which had called for the lead MRF truck to take far outside security and the second to take near outside security. Both had entered the compound.

Things had happened so quickly, and it didn't immediately register that we had no outside security. It did with the team's second medic and designated sniper, John, who, riding on the truck just ahead of TPT which was last, hopped out just inside the entrance. TPT stopped, as they were supposed to, right there in the street and started the broadcast recording, “Attention! Attention!”

John yelled to TPT, “Security,” and the four took up positions around TPT's Surf and the Norwegians' Land Cruiser, as the two filmmakers hurried on foot inside the compound. John would recall later, “I wanted to be inside where the action would be, but I saw the murf didn't go to their security positions outside, and someone had to.”

John and the three TPT had no idea what was going on inside the compound, so they didn't know whether the guy bursting from the corner of the compound a hundred feet from them was friend or foe. As Rob tells it, “He had an AK, but he didn't see us and he wasn't aiming it at us.” Was he a threat, wasn't he? Shoot or not? We hadn't shot while the guy was inside, and John and TPT now watched as he dashed out of sight down a side alley.

Protecting Our Ass End

They didn't know it at the time, and we inside didn't either, but the four of them out there were about five minutes away from doing what rear security's designed to do: protect our vulnerable ass end.

Meanwhile, inside it was then a matter of mopping up, rounding up the scattering of men throughout the compound and corralling them. Weapons were confiscated. The compound was searched. The homemade bombs uncovered.

Two of the bombs were what had been described by the source—propane tanks. And they weighed twice what a normal full one would. Later, when the bombs were dissected by TF-180's Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) in Bagram, they were shown to contain

plastic explosive and a mixture of nails and screws. Also uncovered were two homemade plastic explosives built in wooden cases disguised as boxes of candy. With the bombs were cell phones and an answering machine switchboard, all rigged as initiation devices, or detonators.

Naturally, all the detained men denied any knowledge of the bombs. “Bombs, what bombs?” In our experience we'd learned that you could hit a compound in the middle of absolutely nowhere and uncover, say, a thousand 107mm rockets and maybe another thousand 82mm mortar rounds, and not one of the, say, dozen guys you just busted living right there in the compound would have any idea where the ammunition had come from, how long it had been there, who had brought it, and, in fact, by the word of Allah, they didn't even know it was there until we'd stormed in the place. “Rockets? What rockets?”

This day, like all other raids, it would take some serious questioning to find out the truth. But there was no time for that right now, as we learned that an armed force had arrived outside.

What had happened was, word of our takedown of the compound had gone out the moment we had turned into the entrance. This compound belonged to a small-time commander, and he and two pickup trucks of his “soldiers” rushed to the scene. Had it not been for John and the TPT who, with their guns locked and cocked, stopped the trucks cold when they turned down the street, these soldiers would have come in from behind and surprised us, and who knows who would have shot first—them, our MRF or us?

For all he knew, the commander would think that his compound was being raided by a rival commander. Which illustrates one of the problems in Afghanistan. In Nangarhar Province alone one could not count the number of rival mini-armies, sometimes no bigger than gangs, under a variety of commanders.

John and TPT held the commander and his troops off until a quick truce could be established and the commander could be invited inside. He claimed to be one of the sub-sub-sub-sub-commanders under our ally, General Ali, which we would later confirm to be true, though Ali would profess to having had no knowledge of the bomb-making activities of the subordinate's men.

It was the same that morning with the commander. “Bombs,” he was

shocked to learn, “you found home-made bombs here?” Dismay, surprise or acting, it's Afghanistan; it's not even worth arguing about. Take your prisoners and leave, and sort it all out later. There was nothing more we could get or gain by lingering. Quantity and tonnage-wise, we hadn't gotten much from the raid—a handful of weapons and just the four bombs and their remote detonators. Nothing like the thousands of cases of Dashika machine-gun ammo and thousands of mortar and rocket rounds we had already taken and would take in the future in other raids. But, as our questioning of the suspects would later confirm, the improvised bombs had been intended for use against us.

Further, we would learn from the identity of the Taliban leaders who controlled this bomb cell. Not that that mattered; we were quite familiar with the names. Guys already on our own most-wanted list. Guys who Laval's sources were reporting were sitting comfortable and safe ... right across the border ... off-limits to us ... in Pakistan.

In the grand Operation Enduring Freedom strategic scheme of things, this raid, though it made the AP wire, didn't even register. For us, though, it was a good lesson—sort of an unexpected look in the mirror. Each of us knew that we should have shot the man wielding the AK, yet we were glad we did not. He was a threat, he was unpredictable, and by the established rules of engagement, we had a perfect right to shoot him. Our collective gut instinct in those few split-seconds had been that shooting him would initiate a firefight, which would have left us and our MRF more vulnerable, as we were out in the open, with an unknown quantity of enemy in the rooms that surrounded us. That we did not shoot, not one of us, was a case of fire discipline to the extreme. That was the lesson learned—our image in the mirror—and it was a small badge of pride.

Sure, one man escaped. But we got the bombs. Before they could get us.

Today from Iraq we are seeing almost daily the horror that comes from home-made bombs. Had Laval's source network not come through at the last minute and had we not recovered the bombs before they could be employed against us, that horror very well would have been ours ... and not all of ODA 2025 would not have made it home in one piece.

Paul Avallone, since 1978, has served with the 7th, 12th and 20th Special Forces Group (s) Airborne. ✕

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