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# BLOWING IT UP

## ODA 2025 "Disappears" Tons Of Munitions

TEXT & PHOTOS BY  
PAUL AVALLONE

It's the dream of any schoolboy who has thrown cherry bombs in toilets, lit strings of firecrackers under bleachers and slapped M-80s into mailboxes. It's post-war Afghanistan, where the opportunity to make really big Booms is just around the corner, at the next uncovered weapons cache. If a guy doesn't want to go through the trouble of becoming Special Forces for the thrill of a really big bang, there's a quicker and easier route through the Army's Explosive Ordnance Detachments (EOD). What SF unearths, often EOD is called in to make disappear in fire, black smoke and a mushroom cloud.

That was the case with my Special Forces team, ODA 2025, during its deployment in eastern Afghanistan, a region ruled for centuries by warring warlords, including, in the 1980s by the heavily-armed Russians and in the 1990s by the ruthless Taliban.

The initial blast of the 500+ Chinese 107 rockets, viewed from approximately 700 meters away.

Afghanistan's culture of "might makes right," in which physical power is respected more than anything. In such an environment, the accrual of materiel that brings one, or maintains, that physical power — in a nutshell, the stocking of guns and ammunition — is a top priority.

During seven months in eastern Afghanistan, I was constantly amazed at just how much guns and ammunition the Afghans had stored hidden away, from tiny caches behind false walls in living compounds to caches that filled the various buildings within rural warlords' fortress compounds. (See last month's SOF article, "The Guns of Afghanistan.") Most all the ammunition was of Russian or Chinese origin,

dating from the 1980s' Russian occupation. Allowing the Afghans to now keep the munitions is an invitation for their using them in inter-warlord fighting, and worse, against the American forces.

My team was in country less than two weeks and just getting its feet wet, beginning to learn the intricacies of the power structure, when it uncovered the first huge cache. Understand that caches are not found by patrolling the countryside and sniffing them out. That would be like looking for needles among a thousand different haystacks. Finding a cache begins with an Afghan (a "source") going to the Americans, (in most cases, the Special Forces ODA operating in the area), and telling them of the cache under an agreement that the source will get a financial reward from, say,





Joe, a sergeant from the Explosive Ordnance Detachment, and a MRF trained in demolitions rig munitions to destroy. This small stash includes rockets, land mines, mortars and grenades. (inset) ODA 2025 engineer (demolitions specialist) Sergeant First Class Chuck and Air Force Tac-P Frank (attached to the ODA) observe the demolitions of tons of munitions discovered in a series of caves in eastern Afghanistan. At a distance of approximately 800 meters from the explosion, Chuck and Frank assumed they were safe, but rocks and debris flew that far over their heads.





**ODA engineer (and demolitions specialist) Chuck (left) lays C-4 blocks with EOD Dan and Joe on a stack of more than five hundred Chinese 107 rockets. The rockets were a part of a cache of more than a thousand rockets, thousands of mortar rounds and other ammunition that ODA 2025 uncovered in rural eastern Afghanistan.**

\$50.00 U.S. to a few hundred, or few thousand dollars, depending on the size of the cache, for the information if it proved accurate.

### **Enter General Malick**

In the very first case, fresh in the country, the ODA was approached by one of Eastern Corps Commander General Ali's sub-commanders, General Malick, who claimed that a militia force unfriendly to the new Afghan government (and thus unfriendly to the U.S.) had a large cache of rockets, mortars and ammunition in a series of desert caves fewer than 20 kilometers as the crow flies from our base in Jalalabad. Further, Malick claimed that it was rockets from that cache that had only recently been employed in random attacks against the Jalalabad airfield, adjacent to which was the ODA's MRF compound.

Respecting the position and integrity of the source, General Malick, the ODA mounted-up with its MRF and headed for the area. Approaching the caves, the ODA saw that they were guarded by a cadre of militiamen that, because militias in Afghan, even if they are part of an officially sanctioned government force, are not necessarily dressed in uniforms, appeared to the Americans new to the country, to be renegades.

From the distance, approaching in their Toyota pickups, the team saw some of the militiamen pull a tarp from a mounted Dashika machine gun, and Captain Jim immediately gave the order for the pickups to disperse and come on line. More importantly, Jim directed the men to shoot if that Dashika was swung around and aimed on them.

"It was pure good luck," Jim explained, "that Deke noticed something and came on the radio and said, 'Wait a second. Isn't that an Afghan flag up there?'" Intel Sergeant Deke's observation had been correct. "And why would they be flying the Afghan flag," Jim clarified, "if they were unfriendly to the government?" The ODA stopped and sent one truck of MRF forward, cautiously, peaceably. The militiamen turned out to be soldiers under another of General Ali's sub-commanders, General Moosa, and the cache belonged to Moosa.

"Malick and Moosa are of equal rank under Ali," Jim explained. "But Malick was trying to usurp Moosa and he was setting us up to start a fight with Moosa's men, and that way get Moosa on the wrong side of the Americans. It almost worked. If Deke hadn't spotted the Afghani flag."

The ODA took control of the cache; Moosa was a commander under Ali who, in his own right, was being funded under the table by the U.S. to the tune, the rumor was, of \$50,000.00 U.S. cash each month.

But Moosa's army had no need for the hundreds of tons of munitions in the caves. There was so much, in fact, that the few cases of C-4 that the ODA always kept on hand for odds-and-ends usage, such as demolishing tiny caches or blowing entry into compounds, wouldn't begin to destroy this moth-

*Continued on page 66*



er lode. An EOD team from Task Force 180 was brought in and in two days and two massive explosions the cave caches were blown-up in place.

### "Green On Green"

What Malick had done to try and set us against Moosa was an example of a major problem then and still today in Afghanistan. In the military shorthand of the combat zone it's called "green on green." "Green" being the term of Afghan irregular militia forces. "Green on green" is rival warlords, or militia commanders, fighting each other over turf. The fights are usually direct — one guy's militiamen attacking the other guy's. What happened to our team — new to the country, remember, and still somewhat "cherry" — was unique, and ingenious, in that one commander nearly got us unwittingly to do his "Green-on-green" fighting for him.

### Malik Declared Off-Limits

The ODA put Malik off-limits. He was told that we would no longer deal with him. Captain Jim asked our own compatriot, locally operating civilian-clothed, Americans, known world-wide for their covert way of doing business, to cut-off any U.S. funding for Malik, if the U.S. was indeed throwing thousands of dollars his way monthly as it was Ali's way.

The word must have gotten out: "This new American team means business." A week later, the third of the three commanders directly below Ali, General Hajji Zahier, invited us to lunch at his ranch. In the course of the afternoon, he declared his allegiance to the United States by bringing us to a separate walled compound on his land and turning over to us the tons and tons of munitions he had stored in the numerous buildings there. Again, the cache contained rocket rounds, mortar

rounds, anti-aircraft ammunition, machine-gun ammo, you name it. Again, we brought in EOD and in the course of three days work, with hired laborers, jingle-trucked all the stuff further out to the desert — no small task, with the tremendous size of the cache — and blew it.

One would almost think that General Zahier was one hel-luva guy, just turning over the munitions to us like that. One must remember, though, that this was Afghanistan. And things are never quite what they at first appear there. In this instance, first, if Zahier was allowing us to take that particular cache, then who knows what other huge caches he had elsewhere that he would never reveal to us? Further, the compound in which the munitions were stored was a huge, palatial living place — with four separate mansion-type residences — and it was only three-quarters complete. The surrounding wall and its turrets were up and the buildings were all roofed, but none had doors, windows, electricity, water or any finished features. One can never convince me that Zahier's motivations in giving us the munitions were not more selfish than friendly. I believed then, and still do, that he turned over the cache to get someone to clean out the compound so that he could continue with the final stages of construction. It worked, too; it was *our* money that paid for the laborers, and *our* efforts that did the work. Then, with the palatial compound cleaned out, the construction that had been postponed years before during the lean Taliban years could now continue, as, since Zahier was the overall commander of the Eastern Corps border security and the Americans had run out the Taliban and had established a reviving economy, the money was again rolling in. From where? I don't know. I guess a succinct explanation would be, "It's Afghanistan."

The caches the ODA captured in the next six months did

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*ODA 2025 with a contingent of its MRF, SF's modern-day equivalent to the CIDG/CSF of the Vietnam era.*

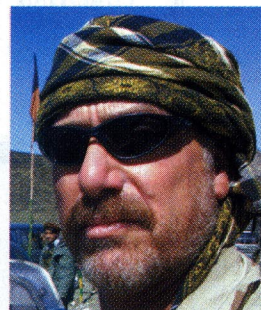






**EOD Joe poses with the more than five hundred Chinese 107 rocket rounds rigged for demolition with blocks of C-4.**

*(right) Author Paul Avallone*



not come as easily and cheaply as those first two. Some were huge, some were small. We found a metal detector to be very useful in finding small buried caches. For the big caches, we'd bring in EOD and have them help us with the destruction.

The word spread that we Americans were true to our word that we would pay for information that led us to a cache, and we had no lack of locals trying to collect. Thus, we hit a number of "dry holes." We would not pay for dry holes, but we wouldn't know they were dry until we investigated, and that was a waste of our time and put us at needless risk; in the rural backcountry, IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and ambushes were always a threat.

#### **Why Afghans Are Still Living In Dirt Huts ...**

One particular dry hole is worth forgetting but is illustrative of the Afghan culture. We'd driven three hours then had to foot-hump another two up the mountains to a collapsed cave near the Pakistan border. Supposedly, the cave contained tons of weapons and ammunition left by a retreating rebel commander during the Russian occupation. The cave's entrance had been collapsed so that the Russians could not get the munitions. For four days squads of our MRF and a collection of hired laborers dug and dug and dug. And never made it close to getting inside. In a lesson that anyone who has spent any amount of time in Afghanistan working with the people knows, the MRF and laborers really didn't dig that much. Hard physical labor is not a passion among the Afghans. Whenever our backs were turned, the shovels stopped. Even when our backs weren't turned, most of the

shovel-action up there on that mountainside was more show than actual moving of dirt.

In a final twist, we were paying the laborers what we paid our lowest-rank MRF — five dollars U.S. a day — more than twice the average Afghan wage. In two days the important three-day cultural holiday EID was coming. The laborers gave up the opportunity to work those two prior days and earn what would be a week's normal pay just because, "EID is coming in two days." Mind you, this was in the rural mountains, and there would most likely be no work for the laborers after EID and who knew when there would be the opportunity to work again. No matter; the money, if it is to be gotten by physical labor, was not worth having those extra two days off. The lesson, simply put: That's why the Afghans are still living in dirt huts with dirt floors.

We called it quits on that mountain. Let the people have their EID, and their two days prior, and let the mountain retain its cache. Luckily for us, all of the other caches, before and after, required little or no digging.

And caches we collected. Arguably, more in number and volume than any of the other SF ODA in the country at the time. And for the few thousands of dollars we paid out for the information that led us to the caches — it was a cheap price to pay to keep from having those munitions turned around and one day used on us. Or, at a future time — whenever that may be — when the U.S. is no longer securing the country, having them used by rival warlords on each other or a by newly reinvigorated Taliban to recapture the country.

*Another feature on Special Forces ODA 2025 will appear in next month's SOF.* ☒