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PAUL AVALLONE

**U.N. Aide Says Afghan Drug Trade Pays for Terrorist Attacks**

By Carlotta Gall

(Quoted from *The New York Times INTERNATIONAL*,  
Friday, 5 September 2003.):

KABUL, Afghanistan, August 30 — The American-led forces in Afghanistan must address the country's drug trade because the huge opium and heroin crops are being used by militants to finance their activities, the top United Nations drug official has warned.

Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the Vienna-based United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, said in an interview here that there were indications that those carrying out violence in Afghanistan were financing their attacks with drug trafficking, and in some places forcing farmers to grow opium poppies.

"The terrorists and traffickers are the same people," he said at the end of a weeklong visit to Afghanistan. "You cannot fight the war against terror without going against drug trafficking."

Mr. Costa said that he had asked the American-led forces here several times to focus on the drug trade, and that he had seen reports that military forces had recently intercepted drug traffickers and had destroyed at least one illegal heroin laboratory.

John on his M-24 sniper rifle, with AN/PVS-10 Day/Night sniper scope, with Frank sighting with Steiner M22 range-finder binos, keep an overwatch on the main avenue of approach while the ODA and its MRF complete mop-up of the two active drugs labs during a three-compound-simultaneous hit in the heroin capital of Afghanistan, the Shin War Valley. (inset) This poppy bud, torn open, reveals the sticky white resin coming from the stem. It is this resin from which opium and heroin is processed.

STRIKING AT THE

HEROIN

TRADE

WITH SF IN AFGHANISTAN PART 1



Afghanistan was the world's largest source of illicit opium in 2002, producing 3,750 tons, according to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime. This year's harvest will be much the same, Mr. Costa Said. ..."

Two months after 9-11, B Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group of the Alabama National Guard, was called up to active duty. The company spent the next eight months at Fort Bragg, NC, attached to 7th Special Forces Group, executing joint-training missions in Central and South America. In late August 2002, the company as well as the then-also-activated 20th Group Headquarters and the remainder of the 1st Battalion were deployed to Afghanistan for Operation Enduring Freedom. The five Operational Detachments Alpha (ODAs) of B Company were each assigned a strategic location in eastern Afghanistan.

It is no secret that ODA 2025, on which the author was a communications sergeant, operated in Nangarhar Province, working out of the only city there, Jalalabad. With approximately 150,000 people, Jalalabad is the country's third largest city, after Kabul and Kandahar. Calling it a city might be a stretch. With electricity an on-and-off luxury, piped running water almost non-existent, paved streets measured by the meter not the mile, no official police force, no fire department, no banks, no phone system, no newspaper and no mail, it is more an overgrown village. Fundamentalist Muslim to its core, Nangarhar/Jalalabad was a pre-war Taliban stronghold, as well as the home of Osama bin Laden.

The province borders Pakistan on the east and the south in a set of mountain ranges. The eastern gate to Pakistan is through the Khyber Pass, and the southern gate is a myriad of footpaths through the Tora Bora Mountains. Except for the city of Jalalabad itself, which is set in a fertile valley through which the Kabul River flows, Nangarhar province is a harsh terrain of dirt, rock, terraced poppy fields and snow-covered mountains. The majority of the people there live in a scattering of rural villages that are, but for the internal combustion engine, still lost in the 16th Century.

For seven months, from mid-September 2002 to mid-April 2003, ODA 2025 performed its mission, which was to deny the province to the Taliban and al-Qaeda and to destroy any of their personnel or arms uncovered. The following is the author's first-hand account of the ODA's operations against the Taliban-run opium/heroin trade in its Area of Operation (AO).

**W**e'd been on the road for a good deal more than two hours, starting the day early, up at around 0300 hours and rounding up four squads of our Mobile Reaction Force (MRF, pronounced "murf") a short while later at their compound. Speaking through one of our terps (interpreters), Team Leader Captain Jim and Team Sergeant Terry laid out the operational plan for the MRF squad leaders, who would pass it down to their guys. Then, sometime after 0400 we moved out in our little parade of Toyota pickups

— us in our Tacomas, our MRF in their HiLuxs.

Two-plus hours later, and the night was gone and full sunrise was maybe no more than 10 minutes away. Word came back on the inner-team channel of our MBTR (pronounced "embitter") radios that we were "five minutes out."

All right, finally. We should have hit the target already, maybe 15 minutes ago, in the gray light between night and day, when people are definitely still sleeping and surprise is more assured. But we'd lost time when we'd taken a wrong turn somewhere, driving in the dark without headlights, and had to correct by retreating and then crossing some expanses of terraced fields, just four-wheeling over short stone walls and irrigation ditches.

A MRF truck was in the lead, with squad leader Buba Jon and some of his guys. It was hard enough keeping track in the daylight of the back roads (a better descriptive name might be rutted paths) that spider-web rural eastern Afghanistan, never mind trying to do it in the dark without headlights.

We were in the foothills of the Spin Ghar mountains in the Shin War valley, the place from where 60 percent of the European heroin comes. That's worth repeating — from this valley alone comes 60% of the European supply of heroin. Think Shin War, think opium poppies. Yet, at that barren time of year, mid-November, the one word that best visually describes the valley is the color of dirt — tan. Tan everything.



Starting with the earth itself, to the dirt walls of the huge compounds in which the extended families live to the terraced poppy fields that were then barren.

#### Heading Into Heroin Country

We'd passed through numerous villages in the dark and might have been heard, then seen, by someone connected to the drug business. If the guy had a cell phone, he could have called ahead a general warning that the Americans were heading into heroin country. It was something not to think about, being something completely out of our control.

The first half-hour of the trip had been fast, speeding down Highway 1. To call it a highway is to be more than generous, as it's barely two lanes of thin broken asphalt, pockmarked with potholes the size of four-drawer filing cabinets that, hitting at 60 miles per hour, challenges one not to check

the rearview mirror for the axle and wheel you'd swear you'd just left in your wake.

Highway 1 is the road from Kabul by way of Jalalabad to Pakistan, crossing at the Khyber Pass. The only extensive, unbroken stretch of asphalt is from Jalalabad to Pakistan. At night we could do 60 down this stretch because truckers didn't use the road much after dark, fearing the roadside bandits who would extort money or steal the loads.

Bandits were not a threat to us; we traveled too heavy, in both manpower and weapons. With 95 percent of our movement by vehicle, on Highway 1 or dirt roads, the danger to us was IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), which were homemade landmines detonated by remote control. The risk was greatly lessened by our O-dark-thirty departure and by keeping our intentions secret, even from our MRF, until the last-minute pre-movement briefing.

It's a somewhat strange thing, us being 95 percent mobile in pickup trucks; throughout my 25 years in SF, I had never imagined that we'd be riding into combat in any vehicle, let alone 4-wheel-drive four-door Toyota Tacomas. From the first days of SF's famous Phase Training Qualification Course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the emphasis then — and still today — has been on humping rucksacks in the woods and living out of those rucks. No more, not in Afghanistan. We and our MRF patrolled Ranger-file mobile in our Toyota pick-



(far left) Clearing a drug processing lab in rural Afghanistan, Jason (left) and Laval (right) cover John kicking in the door of an interior building. (above) John stands guard over the segregated and bagged detainees who are awaiting their fate during the mop-up of the two opium/heroin processing labs ODA 2025 raided in rural Afghanistan. (left) The team establishes a temporary base while on patrol in the foothills overlooking the semi-fertile terrain in eastern Afghanistan. These are some of the Toyota pickup trucks used by the ODA. The two pickups in the rear are the MRF's HiLuxs, with the Tactical Psyops Team's Surf with the broadcast speakers on the roof. In the foreground, note the variety of antennas on the roof of the silver Tacoma. The satellite antenna on the side enabled real-time communication around the world at any time while in movement.

ups. Sure, that mode of travel presents a high and overt profile, but in a land that is basically a huge expanse of semi-arid desert, foot movement would be ludicrous.

The few times we ran foot patrols in the mountains, we'd drive the pickups as far as we could, until the rutted roads became narrow foot paths, then humped the rest of the way. Those foot patrol efforts proved futile in finding and fighting the enemy because in the barren mountain terrain concealment was non-existent and a lookout could spot a patrol a mile away, leaving ample time for the enemy to disperse and "unass the AO", as the saying goes. Whatever elements of the Taliban and al-Qaeda that were still in Afghanistan during the time of our deployment had long ago learned not to confront the Americans head-on.

In fact, by the time we made it to Afghanistan in September 2002, the major fighting of the war had been over

for months and our mission was to find and root out whatever remained of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. A corollary of that was to establish a secure environment in which the Civil Affairs teams attached to us could perform their separate mission, which was to start the rebuilding of the country.

#### Reliance On Low-Level Source Intel

Other than the Special Forces mission to stand up and train the new Afghan Defense Forces in Kabul, like it or not and as much as our command denied it, we knew that the SF role in the outback of Afghanistan was getting closer and closer to morphing into a police action. That said, our success counted on us creating an efficient unconventional-warfare setting in which we established, equipped, trained and

*Continued on page 74*



## Heroin Tade

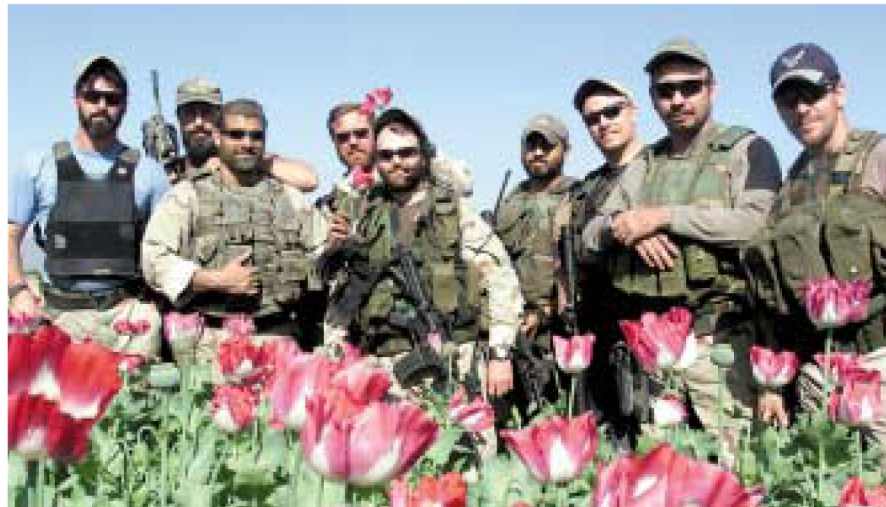
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led our own personal army (the MRF) and acted upon low-level source intelligence gathered from within, not intel passed down from higher to us.

Ideally, we would have had helicopters take us to our distant targets, like the drug labs that morning. A half-dozen Black Hawks or a couple of Chinooks could have picked us up at our MRF compound, and we could have been on target within minutes instead of hours, arriving with very little risk of having been seen ahead of time and losing the element of surprise. But the helicopters were at Bagram Air Base (near Kabul), a 40-minute flight away and, more importantly, a part of Task Force 180, the overall command of the theater.

It was enough that our CJSOTF (Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, located at Bagram, the command of all the Special Forces battalions and ODAs within the Afghanistan theater) had to ask (or beg) TF-180 to lend helicopter support to resupply us and the two dozen-odd other ODAs scattered throughout the country; we were not going to get choppers for our operations. Period.

The general feeling of the SF guy in the boonies was that, though it had



Five members of ODA 2025 pose in a blooming poppy field along with four attachments. (L-R) ODA: Terry, Laval, Greg, Dean, Brian; Attachments: Tac-P Lou, OGA Mike, A.D. Miller, TPT Rob. (opposite) Much of the subversive forces in Afghanistan are funded by the opium/heroin trade. An essential ingredient to the processing is acidic acid anhydride. The 55 gallon drums here are some of the 300 uncovered in a rural cache, moved down into the ditch and set ablaze. Overwatching is Sergeant First Class Laval.

been SF who had initially won the ground war and it was then SF who was keeping the Taliban and al-Qaeda from crossing the border from Pakistan and reestablishing themselves, TF-180's attitude toward Special Forces was that of a haughty father to a distant stepchild — as it always seems to be when conventional units have command over SF.

So, we rode to war in our Toyotas. And a better truck than the Tacoma I

can't imagine. We beat ours to death in arguably the roughest terrain in the world, eastern Afghanistan, and we just couldn't break them. Like tough, battered, big, steel Energizer bunnies, they kept going and going and going...

That morning in November we'd sped down an empty Highway 1 for a half-hour then been jarred and bounced for two hours on dirt roads. We were now "five minutes out." Our target: Two adjacent compounds that we were pretty

confident were opium-processing labs.

Our mission in Afghanistan was not anti-drug — just the opposite. We were directed not to interfere with the opium and heroin trade — it was off-limits. But the intel that our senior medic, Laval, was getting from his just-crank-ing-up-into-high-gear low-level-source network was that much of the Shin War opium/heroin trade was controlled by Taliban or ex-Taliban.

Laval's sources were reporting that much of the money from the trade was supporting Taliban operatives in their safe haven in Pakistan. We had learned that these two labs we were headed for were owned and run by a Taliban supporter, one Hajji Watan. Our mission

ed by the Americans, to do the job. Knowing that the Brits were using this as a way to re-equip themselves at someone else's expense, the U.S. refused to come up with the money. In return, the Brits sat back and did nothing.

### The Special Forces Warrior Spirit

Along came our Captain Jim saying that we had intel confirming that the Taliban was running the drug trade in our AO and, moreso, that we had a pretty good lead on the locations of several active rural labs. According to Jim, the colonel and the powers above looked at this as an opportunity to show the Brits that the job could be done without the extra equipment. The



that day: bust the labs, hoping to nab Watan, which could possibly put us on to the location of even bigger Taliban.

At least, that's how our team commander, Captain Jim, had explained our intentions to the Special Forces colonel who commanded the CJSOTF. The colonel was 20th Group's commander at the time, and this was a first for Special Forces — a National Guard group being given the opportunity and responsibility of combat-theater command. But in these days when the active-duty Special Forces groups are taxed to the max worldwide, it's not likely to be the last.

The colonel had made it clear to Captain Jim that disturbing the Shin War heroin trade had international ramifications that went beyond simply putting a hurt on the European supply of the drug. Besides the fact that the U.S. really hadn't implemented a carved-in-stone anti-Afghanistan-drug policy, the task of dealing with the Shin War opium trade had been given to the British armed forces in the country. But the Brits had been arguing that they needed millions of dollars for new gear, provid-

colonel gave his tacit approval, making it clear, though, Jim told us, that should something go wrong and blame come down from above, that it would be denied that the conversation had ever taken place.

It didn't matter to us; we just wanted the opportunity, any opportunity, to engage the enemy. In our short time in-country, we'd already captured two absolutely humongous ammunitions caches, both without a shot fired. We'd driven innumerable presence patrols ... without a shot fired. We'd busted Taliban money-laundering operations ... without a shot being fired. One time, we'd gathered the intel, worked out the plan and ridden six hours concealed in the backs of jingle trucks on a High Value Target (HVT — a high-ranking Taliban or al-Qaeda operative) snatch, only to be called back at the last minute because the Delta boys (now known as CAG, pronounced like "nag") working out of Kabul had gotten wind of our mission and wanted it for themselves. What Delta wants, Delta gets, so they snatched that snatch mission from us, riding to the rural site in

## CAPTAIN JIM

The common saying "Well, he's no rocket scientist" sure isn't applicable to ODA 2025's team leader, Captain Jim. With advanced degrees in Physics, Space Systems Engineering, and Aerospace Engineering (Propulsion) (with an in-work Ph.D.), Jim is a rocket scientist and demonstrates the diversity of knowledge and skills that National Guard Special Forces soldiers often bring to the military.

A former NASA scientist as a Shuttle Systems Engineer at the Kennedy Space Center, as well as an adjunct professor for Spacecraft Propulsion at the Florida Institute of Technology, Jim moved to his present job as an Engineering Physicist for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, California, just months before 9-11. His assignment at JPL: the Mars 07 project, named "Mars Science Lander." As he explains it, he is "the Principle Investigator on a proposal to explore the near-surface layers of the Martian surface using explosive-shaped charges and seismic detectors." Say what?

Mobilized for Operation Enduring Freedom in January 2002 with B Company, 1st Battalion, 20th SFG, Captain Jim managed in what limited spare time he had during various deployments, including his seven months in Afghanistan, to fulfill his commitment to JPL to write the navigation soft-

ware for the Mars spacecraft launched in 2003.

If all that makes Jim an egghead, think again. Along with being a graduate of the Special Forces Qualification Course, Jim is also a graduate of the physically grueling Combat Diver and Dive Supervisor courses. And if all that makes him a brainiac stud, again, think again. Jim is also a professional musician, having done studio work and performed in various groups on keyboard, trumpet and trombone, not to mention, while in college, having had his own Dixieland band that had a two-year gig at "Storyville" in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

How, one might ask, does Jim have time for a regular life? At 39, he is raising with his wife (herself a Ph.D. in Mathematics) his four children and her four. Whew ...!

That's the thing with National Guard Special Forces. Replace the uniform with civvies, and one never knows what one will find.



Captain James Lewis of ODA 2025, secures a prisoner in hand irons as the team takes him into custody. The suspect, a known local al-Qaeda sympathizer, had been caught with rockets, time fuse and ignitors.

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Delta-style; not in jingle trucks or Tacomas, but rather — who would have guessed it? — in helicopters.

A guy doesn't become SF because he wants to shuffle papers or pass out meds or ammo in the rear with the gear, or because he wants to turn over his missions to Delta. He's SF because he wants to be where the action is and wants to feel the whiz of bullets over his head and the deafening crack of his own return fire from his carbine. It doesn't matter how old he gets, the warrior spirit rarely dies.

For example, a former 12th-Special-Forces-Group (deactivated in 1995) buddy of mine was called to active duty soon after 9-11, at 58 years of age, to teach on the Weapons Committee at the SF Qualification Course. This is a man who in the mid-1960s served two tours of Vietnam as a Marine, went to college afterward, became a Green Beret in the Reserves, had a successful career at the top levels of the California Department of Transportation, and when I ran into him at Fort Bragg just prior to my going to Afghanistan, though he was a great teacher and loved his job in the Q-Course, he pleaded with me to find him a position, any position, anywhere in 20th Group so that he wouldn't be left out of the fight. That's the SF warrior spirit.

As a National-Guard ODA of guys who had put on-hold their civilian careers and families to participate in the War on Terror, we welcomed the opportunity for a fight. Personally, I could care less about the availability of a heroin fix for a junkie on the streets of Paris or Berlin. If a fool wants to shoot-up, cheers to him, and I shed no tears when he ODs. If a society has illegal drug usage it wants ended, I believe the fight has to be taken to the users — not the foreign suppliers, in particular, not the dirt-poor Afghan (or, for that matter, Bolivian) farmer who is simply making the best living he can in Third- and Fourth-World circumstances. Now, if those foreign drug operations are supplying money to our sworn enemies — the Taliban and al-Qaeda — that's a different story, and they're fair game.

These labs we were going after, owned and operated by this unknown Taliban, Hajji Watan, would be our game this morning, just five minutes from now. And it was anyone's guess the action just up ahead.

Next month in Part 2, ODA 2025 hits the lab — and gets more than it bargained for. ✕