



**EXCLUSIVE! THE 6.8mm COMBAT CARTRIDGE**

# SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

SOFMAG.COM

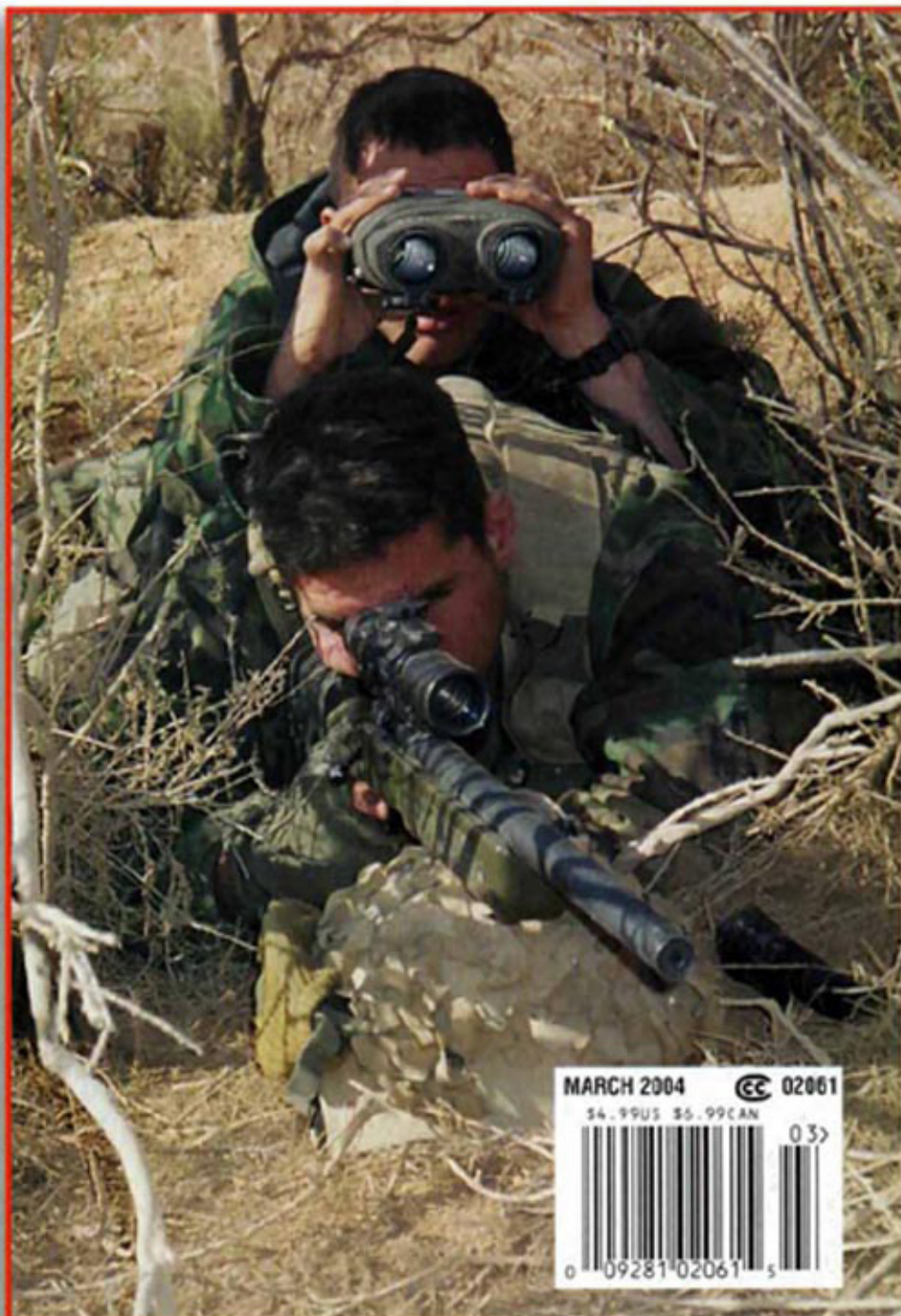
## USMC SCOUT-SNIPERS IN IRAQ

★  
**SF BUSTS AFGHAN  
"SMACK" LABS**

★  
**VN "KINGBEES"  
HONORED BY SOA**

★  
**CRAZY HORSE TROOP:  
IRAQI FIREFIGHTS  
INTENSIFY**

★  
**SHOULD  
JOURNALISTS  
CARRY WEAPONS?**



MARCH 2004

02061

\$4.99US \$5.99CAN



0 09281 02061 5

03



# STRIKING AT THE HEROIN TRADE

## With SF In Afghanistan **PART 2**

**A** National-Guard Special Forces A-Team from Alabama-based 20th Group, ODA 2025 recently spent seven months deployed to eastern Afghanistan. The story of the team's missions against the Taliban-run opium/heroin trade continues now, as the team, on the road with some of its MRF (Mobile-Reaction Force — the Afghan militia the team formed, equipped, trained and led) hours before dawn, was now, in the gray light just before sunrise, about to hit a pair of suspected processing labs in the foothills of the Toro Bora Mountains, a fiercely pro-Taliban area.

We were looking for action, and this was going to be it. Laval and our Senior Weapons Sergeant, Jason, had been out there the day before on a recon. Dressed in "hajji flage," riding with the source in a nondescript Toyota that looked like a taxi, they'd managed to safely get a few clicks away on a ridge without raising suspicions. They did not stay long, for fear of being compromised, but it was from their observations and sketches that we drew up our plan.

The dirt road we'd be traveling went through a village set amidst terraced poppy fields that at that time of year were barren. The road then swept back around at an incline along a ridgeline and ran about a klick to the two walled compounds in question, both on the left. The two compounds themselves were about two hundred meters apart, and the road, according the Laval and Jason, ended at the second. Behind both compounds was a ravine of terraced fields, eliminating that direction as an approach for us.

TEXT & PHOTOS BY  
PAUL AVALLONE

Thousands of gallons of acetic acid anhydride burn.

We would be hitting both compounds simultaneously. That meant splitting the team — half the ODA hitting the second compound, half the first. We'd be in eight trucks, all Toyotas. We in our three four-door 4WD gas Tacomas brought from the States, and our four squads of MRF in their 4-door diesel Hi-Luxes.

The lead truck would be Buba Jon's, since he knew the complicated route through the rural landscape to get there. Next would be Captain Jim and his half of the split team. The first two trucks, along with the next two MRF trucks, would drive past the first compound and hit the second. The rest of us, including Terry and his team in his Tacoma, me and our TPT (Tactical Psyops Team), Rob and Fuchs, in mine, and two MRF trucks bringing up the rear, would hit the first compound.

A squad of MRF would go to the flanks and rear of each compound for security, while the remaining squads would enter each compound behind our assault elements: Jim's team for the far compound, Terry's for the near, with Jason and "demo" Chuck, respectively, assigned the task of blowing each compound's steel entry doors if necessary.

TPT Rob and Fuchs, having joined us just a couple of weeks earlier, didn't have their own vehicle yet and weren't quite incorporated into the techniques of the ODA, but they were extra guns as backup remaining at the trucks.

### Element Of Surprise Lost By The "Infidel Invaders?"

Likewise, I would remain outside because I had not gone through the SFAUCC (Special Forces Advanced Urban Combat Course) with the ODA while Stateside. I would man the M-240 machinegun mounted on Terry's Tacoma ahead of mine and offer possible covering fire for Terry's assault team. The ODA had gone through weeks of building- and room-clearing drills during SFAUCC, learning to secure interiors as a full team and as split teams, and it would be reckless to have the TPT or me enter



Through one of our "terps" (right), John questions one of the detainees during the mop-up of the drug labs. This young man, eventually taken into custody, proved to be the nephew of Hajji Watan, the Taliban owner of the drug labs who the ODA had hoped to capture. Hajji Watan was there, taken with the others, but his nephew and the others remained loyal and tight-lipped about his identity.



with them and risk shooting someone in the back or getting shot ourselves because we weren't familiar with the teams' clearing procedures.

Drawn up on the dry-erase board the night before back at the safehouse, the plan was as good as we were going to get, provided the circumstances, including the inability to actually have eyes-on watching the target continuously a minimum of twenty-four hours prior to assault. That was simply impossible in our neck of Afghanistan. First, there is no concealment there, and one isn't going to be able to dig a hide site in the rock-hard dirt. Second, getting to the hide site by vehicle is a dead giveaway. Even wearing hajjilflag, an American is disguised only from a distance or for a limited amount of time. In the same sense, Afghan strangers (our own MRF, for example, as recon) in a rural area are very soon suspect and investigated by the locals. We had risked compromise by sending Laval and Jason to recon the site, and we hoped that their presence had not been detected and suspicions raised, taking away our element of surprise.

Either way, whether we would arrive in complete surprise or not, we expected resistance. No one — not the Brits nor the American teams before us — had pulled a drug raid in Shin War, which had been a strong Taliban area before the war and was still, afterwards, pro-Taliban and leery and hostile to outsiders, in particular, the American forces whom the Taliban propaganda machine was still calling "infidel invaders." Our intel said that this man Hajji Watan owned the two labs, but we knew nothing more about him — not even what he looked liked — and we knew nothing about the strength of his own forces. That they would protect their drug turf wasn't even a

question. Obviously, we were counting on arriving just at dawn, out of nowhere, so to speak, in total surprise. If they already knew we were coming, we'd either find two empty compounds, (with no traces of processed drugs or equipment), or we'd be hammered like hell by shooters behind the compounds' walls as we drove up.

For backup, we had our Air Force TAC-P (Tactical Air Control Party) at the time, Tech Sergeant Frank Lofton, pulled some strings with his counterparts in Bagram to have fighter air-cover. How Frank did it I don't know, because asking for air cover prior to an operation would throw red flags up all over the CJSOTF and risk having the mission disapproved because it would thereby be deemed too dangerous. But Frank got us air cover prior to, during the raid, and subsequent destruction of the labs and also for the return trip back to the safehouse — sometimes considered the most dangerous part of any operation, since often, as it was that day, a large portion of the way in was the only way back out — an engraved invitation for ambushes or IEDs.

Everything was set, we were a little late, but we were almost there. Up ahead was the village, at least it looked like the same setting Laval and Jason had described. Then Frank passed the word along the internal coms that we had a Harrier as air cover and, further, that the pilot had relayed that he was getting from his thermal sights excessive heat signatures from the two compounds as he did high-altitude flyovers. Excessive heat signatures, like those from drug-processing labs. As for detecting unusual movement or not, no word on that.

We were through the village and starting up the slight

Laval (second on right) and Terry (rear left, DCU hat and uniform), direct the MRF to storm a rural village compound suspected as being an opium/heroin-processing lab.



John stands guard over detainees captured during a raid on rural opium-processing labs. Poppies, from which opium and subsequently heroin are derived, is the major cash crop of Afghanistan,

and the two labs raided this day by the Special Forces ODA were owned by a Taliban operative, with money from them funneled to exiled Taliban in Pakistan.





incline, and suddenly, Terry's Tacoma right in front of me stopped, and I slammed on the brakes. Chuck, riding the mounted M-240 on that Tacoma, jumped off, then I saw what was wrong: The barrel of the 240 lay on the ground where Chuck now retrieved it. All the jarring and bouncing had snapped the barrel from the receiver in the gun mount. Chuck jumped back up into the truck bed; the other trucks were out of sight over the crest. Terry's Tacoma shot forward, and I followed, watching Chuck attempting to reattach the barrel while trying to hold on, being bounced around the back. That was the gun I was supposed to man when we hit the target, which, as we crested the incline, was right ahead, the first walled compound.

Then, suddenly, came the rat-tat-tat-tats of AKs firing! The lead trucks had skidded to stops, and some of the MRF were dispersing, a few now firing also, tat-tat-tat, tat-tat-tat-tat, going around the corner of the compound.

As Jim described it later, "We were driving toward the first compound, and I saw three barrels flashing. The MRF jumped out and took off in their direction."

It was wrong — Bubba Jon had pulled-up and stopped at the first compound, and the three trucks behind him, including Jim's, had followed. I saw it and thought, "Too late now. Murphy's Law, go with the flow." I didn't hear bullets hitting my truck and couldn't tell who exactly was firing, and at



The man in the center is Hajji Watan, the Taliban owner of the raided drug labs. The ODA did not realize that Watan was among the 20-some detainees until showing the photograph of which this is a close-up detail to the source, who hadn't been present during the raid. Credit for loyalty must be given the other detainees for not revealing Watan's identity during questioning before their release.

whom, and I pulled my truck up beside Terry's. The gunfire was tapering to single shots back around the side of the compound, which I assumed was our MRF taking care of the shooters.

I hopped out, and I saw Captain Jim, Frankie and a MRF at the compound's closed steel doors. Up on the truck, I grabbed the mounted M-240, with its barrel hanging half-loose, and I thought, "I'm not risking it, who knows what's missing? This thing'll blow-up in my face!"

At that time, Jim and Frankie were pushing in the steel front doors, and as Jim told it later, "There was a guy in there with an AK and he opened-up on us. So I fired my M-4, as did Frank, and the MRF with us fired their PKs, then when we looked again, the guy was gone. And I don't know how we missed him. Or where he went."

**"Stay Put And Protect Out Here."**

Silence followed; no more gunfire. Jim and the rest of the ODA quickly organized to enter, and,

since manning the busted 240 was out of the question, I determined not to miss the action inside and jumped off the truck. I unslung my M-4 and ordered the nearby handful of MRF, in gestures as much as words, to "Stay put and protect out here."

Since we'd hit only the first compound, we had plenty of MRF around, our backside would be secure. I grabbed my cameras and headed inside behind the rest of the ODA and a squad of MRF.

It didn't take long for the team to secure the compound and the 20-odd men caught inside. Whoever had been firing from inside was gone; same with whomever it was initially firing at us outside. Out back, Junior Medic John saw a man with an AK across the ravine setting up to snipe from behind a rock wall, and John took cover and fired. The man disappeared, and John moved forward, with Terry now spotting for him with binos. The man did not reappear. Later, we would search the terraced barren fields across the ravine for a body or blood trails and would find neither.

The case was the same for our MRF who had pursued whomever had been shooting at us when we arrived: no body, no blood trails.

But when we were leaving the area two hours later, driving on the other side of the village, we saw villagers in the distance carrying a dead body we suspected might have been a shooter. We'd already

stayed in the area too long, body-count was not a priority, and there was no real value in investigating, so we let them be.

Meanwhile, once we'd secured the first compound, we quickly did the same with the second, finding it empty of people. Whoever had been there (kerosene burners used as heaters were still hot in the rooms) had already left, melting into the landscape. It was our mistake: We might have had them had Bubba Jon not goofed in the excitement of the moment and adhered with the plan, driving by the first compound to attack the second with Jim's team.

Both compounds proved to be active drug-processing labs, with huge steel presses — that we tried but couldn't even dent with thermite grenades — dozens of drums of liquids, vats for cooking, and sacks of both powered and rock chemicals. We turned the compounds upside-down, dumping the liquids and powders and destroying by gunfire all the barrels and vats. We confiscated the two Toyota cars there for our own future use and, against our MRFs' protestations, Jim ordered the one Toyota HiLux pickup destroyed, and it was put ablaze with a thermite to the engine.

"A Toyota pickup is a most valued possession to them in Afghanistan," Jim explained later. "By burning it, we were showing them we weren't there just to take from them."

Attacking to pillage has been a way of life for a thousand years in Afghanistan, and Jim's intention by destroying the pickup instead of taking it was to emphasize that our purpose was to root-out Taliban, not secure booty. Our MRF didn't see it that way; they figured we could do both, and we had to control them from stripping places we raided of everything down to the dirt. Needless to say, it hurt them watching the truck burn.

Six days later we did a simultaneous raid on three drug labs just over the ridgeline, about 2 miles away from these two this day. They also were owned by Hajji Watan. Two proved active, one was a dry hole, and we destroyed the supplies and equipment in the two, accidentally setting afire one entire compound in the process.

Afterward, that same day, out of curiosity we paid a visit to these two compounds, and both were cleaned up, as if



Captain Brian stands above the barrels of acid burning in the ditch, set ablaze by the ODA. The team uncovered a stash of over 300 55-gallon barrels of acidic acid anhydride in a compound used as a supply depot in a rural mountain village.

we'd never been there less than a week earlier. Walking through these spotless compounds gave one the eerie feeling that drug production would begin again the moment the local bosses felt secure that we wouldn't ever be coming back. We'd surprised them that morning, and we continued that way, randomly roaming the valley so that the Taliban drug operatives could not gain that security.

Neither the two-compound raid that first day nor the three-compound raid six days later netted any Taliban, as we had hoped, and that didn't set well high-up the chain. That first day, of the 20-some men we'd detained, after intense on-the-spot questioning, we concluded that Hajji Watan was not among them but wound up taking into custody one who would prove to be Watan's nephew, though a very minor player.

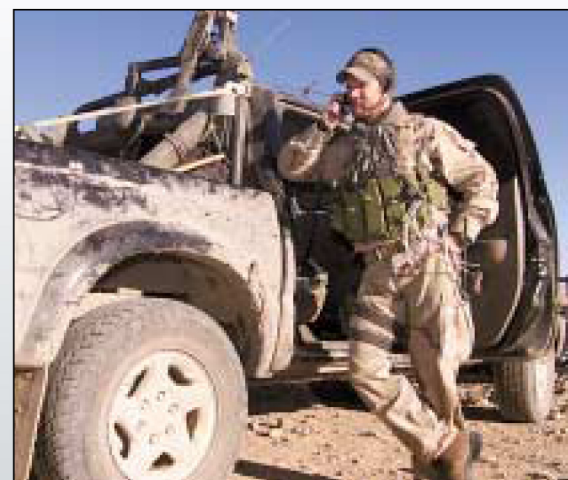
As it turned out, Watan had been there and was among our

**Continued on page 8**



Sergeants First Class Randy (left) and Deke uncover a stash of over 300 55-gallon barrels of acidic acid anhydride in a compound used as a supply depot in a rural mountain village. The acid, used to process poppies into opium and heroin, would be transferred into smaller, 5-gallon containers and donkey- or camel-humped to individual, even more remote, drug-processing labs.

## FRANK LOFTON, TAC-P



An active-duty U.S. Air Force TAC-P based in Germany, TecSgt Frank Lofton was attached to ODA 2025 from September through mid-January. At 26 and single, he's the ideal candidate for a TAC-P, who, with the op tempo of today's Special Forces units, is deployed far more than he is at home.

There may be TAC-Ps as good as Frank, but I can't imagine one better. To begin with, he loves his job. There is nothing he liked better than to arrange air for us, then play hopscotch on the radio, orchestrating the pilots' actions while coordinating with our different ground elements and his own controllers in Bagram.

After leaving us, Frank returned to his base in Germany. The next thing we knew, one of us learned through e-mail that Frankie was in Iraq in the middle of the desert there, in the war, attached to an SF team, calling-in airstrikes; doing what he loves to do.

—PA.



## Heroin Trade Part 2

*Continued from page 7*

detainees — the ones we turned loose — but we did not know it until later that evening when our source pointed him out in the photographs I had taken of the detainees. We had not brought the source along with us on the raid because we did not want him to be compromised, but in hindsight we should have. We could have kept him hidden in one of the Tacomas, behind the tinted glass, to identify the person we wanted. It was a lesson learned the hard way — losing our potential prize catch.

### Cease All Such Missions

Coming away with no High-Value Taliban Target in either that day's raid or the one six days later had the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF), according to Jim, coming down hard on him. We figured that the colonel there was himself getting dlobbered from above with the "SF isn't in the counterdrug business in Afghanistan" mantra, because very shortly after the second drug op we were directed to cease all such missions.

Opium/heroin is Afghanistan's only real export, and it's a money-maker, and we knew that in the Shin War Valley there were drug-processors, like Hajji Watan, who were funneling their profits to the Taliban. Our command would no longer allow us to go after labs, but that did not prevent us from submitting, and getting approved, operational plans that described suspected

"weapons caches" that just happened to wind up being — "Oh, my Lord, who would have believed it?" — drug labs.

Two of these "weapons caches" turned out to be remote foothill storage depots for a chemical used in the poppy-processing — acetic acid anhydride. In those two raids we netted over five hundred 55-gallon drums of the chemical. That was nearly 30,000 gallons of acid that had been trucked all the way across the country from Iran and high into different mountain villages to the depots, to eventually be donkey- or camel-humped to the individual processing labs. No one could convince us that our burning all those drums of acid didn't put a dent in some Taliban's pocketbook.

We met resistance, however small and inconsequential, that very first raid that day. We had even taken some sniper-fire during our two-hour occupation and noticed armed villagers gathering across the ravine, but Frankie had our fighter jet come down from altitude and drop flares as an effective warning, in a display of the air power we had as immediate backup. But, thereafter, in the Shin War Valley, we roamed freely, raiding or just patrolling, without resistance.

"What we were doing on that first drug raid," Captain Jim explained months later, "was sending a message. Sure, we wanted to capture a Taliban drug-money man, and we didn't, but we were really saying, 'Hey, we know you're here with your labs. We're Americans. We're not afraid of you. And we'll come in the front door if we want to.'"

That's what we did during that first drug-lab raid — went right through their front door in total surprise. The resistance, we figured, having no idea the Americans were now targeting the valley's drug labs, probably thought we were simply a rival Afghan gang coming to take their drugs. That raid was a message: The Americans were there. And it worked: No one messed with us after that. Not in Shin War.

### Hajji Watan E&Es To Pakistan

As for Hajji Watan, Laval's source network reported that he had fled for the safety of Pakistan. Months later, Laval learned that Watan was back and was being blackmailed by a number of the sub-commanders of the U.S.-backed Eastern Corps Commander, General Hazarat Ali, whose command was located in our city, Jalalabad. These sub-commanders, we were informed, were extorting money from Watan with threats to turn him in to us.

That is Afghanistan: commanders allied with us using that allegiance for their own profit, not for the cause of bettering the country.

Word was passed to Laval that Watan was sick and tired of paying-off the corrupt subcommanders and wanted to make a deal with us. His proposal, passed through an intermediary, was to meet with us and reveal all he knew in exchange for us not taking him prisoner and his winding up in Guantanamo Bay. But our deployment ended and his offer was not explored. Hajji Watan today remains free.

We had turned everything over to our replacements, an active-duty 3rd Special Forces Group ODA which, one could assume, had also been directed not to engage in counter-drug ops, and, therefore, showed little enthusiasm to pursue this avenue.

By the time we were to leave Afghanistan in mid-April, the terraced fields of the Shin War Valley that had been dirt just months before, were then a beautiful carpet of waist-high flowering poppy plants. White, red and purple flowers as far as the eye could see. Were the labs up and running, cranking-out heroin for the European market? No doubt about it.

But for a while there, short-lived though it was, ODA 2025 showed that if the U.S. wanted to, by using one Special Forces ODA, it could own the Shin War Valley.

Since 1978, Paul Avalone has served with the 7th, 12th and 20th SFGA. ✕



Staff Sergeant Dean (left) and Sergeant First Class Deke (right) show some of the many pounds of brown powder heroin taken as evidence during a raid on an opium-processing lab in rural Afghanistan. Staff Sgt. John is in the middle.