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Troops target Taliban bombmakers

Soldiers to use old-fashioned detective work, forensics to root out insurgents in Afghanistan

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OTTAWA – The Canadians know the names of their killers.

A secret military database contains the names and intimate details of some of Kandahar's most-wanted – insurgents responsible for the roadside bombs targeting Canadian soldiers, four more of whom were killed Friday.



STEFANO RELLANDINI/REUTERS

A helicopter takes off with the bodies of soldiers killed March 20, 2009 in a roadside bombing in the Zhari district, a Taliban stronghold, in Kandahar.

"We're collecting intelligence all the time from all kinds of different sources. Do we have some pictures of some of these guys? Yes, we do," said Col. Omer Lavoie, the commander heading up Canadian efforts to counter roadside bombs.

"We've obviously got a pretty good data bank of insurgent information. We have a pretty good idea about how many numbers of cells we have," Lavoie said.

Using that information, Canadian troops are going up the "enemy hierarchy" with their crosshairs on the insurgents who make the bombs.

Take out the individual digging the hole to plant an improvised explosive device (IED) and the Taliban will find a replacement in hours, someone desperate enough to do the work for "20 bucks."

"But if you can take the guy out who is building the thing or who is transporting it or who is paying for it, then the effect is going to be measured in months or weeks," Lavoie said. And he adds the Canadians have been successful targeting the IED cells though he declines to provide specifics, saying such information might give insurgents "a piece of the puzzle they are missing."

This evolving strategy by the Canadians comes as insurgents are dramatically stepping up their attacks on coalition troops. IED "incidents" in Afghanistan jumped to 539 in the first two months of 2009, from 329 in same period last year, according to U.S. statistics provided to the *Toronto Star*.

The number of coalition forces killed by roadside bombs more than tripled to 32 during that time – up from 10. The number wounded more than doubled as well – 97, compared with 40 last year.

The military closely guards its Kandahar-specific statistics for fear of providing insurgents with "battle-damage assessment."

But Lavoie said up to 60 per cent of IEDs are located and defused before they have a chance to kill or maim soldiers or civilians, a number that is in line with the U.S. figures. He calls roadside bombs the "new normal" and says Canadians are turning to new technology, improved tactics and even old-fashioned detective work to foil the "bastards" who build and place them.

The lingo of those who defend against and track down roadside bomb networks in Afghanistan is abstract – bombs are "devices" and "effects" are the ones that kill – but the urgency of the work is deadly focused.

Lavoie is a husky, seasoned commander who made his name leading Operation Medusa, a two-week assault on Kandahar's Panjwaii district in September 2006 that killed an estimated 200 Taliban and captured another 80. Medusa was also the point where face-to-face battles with the insurgency effectively ended and the roadside bomb became the main weapon in the Taliban arsenal.

"As a battle group commander my perspective always was that they could never defeat us at the tactical level," Lavoie said in an interview at National Defence headquarters. "It's not to sound callous. You're talking to a guy who lost his f----- regimental sergeant major to an IED on a patrol that I was leading, so I've got a personal vested interest in this fight."

Chief Warrant Officer Robert Girouard was travelling one vehicle behind Lavoie in a convoy through Panjwaii on Nov. 27, 2006, when his Bison armoured vehicle was hit by a suicide car bomber, killing the 46-year-old from Bouctouche, N.B., as well as Cpl. Albert Storm.

Attacks from IEDs were not a new phenomenon then. Eighteen Canadian soldiers had already died from roadside bombs and encounters with explosive-laden vehicles. But the threat dramatically escalated as insurgents changed tactics.

Gone were the small, "hastily placed" roadside bombs, Lavoie said. Now soldiers faced more powerful explosives designed to defeat the increasingly armoured vehicles the military was shipping into theatre, including LAV IIIs, and blast-resistant Nyalas, whose V-shaped hulls are specially designed to withstand buried bombs.

"They're not going to defeat us with IEDs, they're not going to defeat us with (rocket-propelled grenades)," Lavoie said.

"But it's at the strategic level that the impact of sending soldiers home in caskets who are killed by IEDs (was felt). We certainly needed to do something at the strategic level to take care of this, this weapon of choice that they've used."

When he returned from Afghanistan, Lavoie, a 26-year veteran of the army with a Master's degree in counter-insurgency, was tapped to establish a counter-IED task force.

The sole job of the team, which now employs about 60 people based in Ottawa, Kingston, Gagetown, N.B., and Kandahar, is to stay one step ahead of the insurgents lurking in Afghanistan's shadows.

It is an endless game of one-upmanship, played out on dusty dirt roads as coalition troops use new tactics or better armoured vehicles and insurgents respond with their own ever-evolving strategies.

Advances in detection techniques have resulted in insurgents using explosive material with less metal content, making it harder to locate by mine sweepers. Taliban spotters study troop movements and tactics, patiently waiting for weaknesses to reveal themselves.

"The last thing we'd ever do is underestimate them. They're a learning enemy," Lavoie said.

The latest Taliban move is to stage "complex, co-ordinated attacks," said James Hasick, a Texas-based defence industry consultant.

Rather than simply planting a single bomb along a well-travelled route, the Taliban is strategically placing explosives to halt a convoy, plus others to hit soldiers as they exit their armoured vehicles. And sometimes an insurgent sniper will be nearby to pick off those who escape the first two blasts, Hasick explained.

It doesn't take much explosive to take out an armoured vehicle. Sometimes just nine kilograms is enough if it's designed right, said Barry Taylor, executive vice-president of HMS Inc., a firm that provides counter-IED advice and equipment to military forces.

"If you've got someone experienced in explosives, knows what the explosive will do, they can be engineered to do some very clever things," Taylor said.

The "bone yard" at the Kandahar Airfield offers a grim testament to the power of an IED attack. This is where vehicles are brought after they've been hit.

"They're not vehicles you would put in front of a recruiting centre," said Senator Colin Kenny, chair of the Senate defence committee, who has seen the area first hand. "You feel awfully secure getting into one of them and it's a sobering reminder when you see what can happen to them, what could happen to you. You look at it and say, 'My God, what hit that?'"

And yet, he says, most of the stories are "good news."

"Most of the time, the vehicle does its job and the soldier walks away. Having said that, the vehicle looks like hell afterwards," he said.

But a bomb doesn't have to penetrate a vehicle to cause injury – the shock wave alone is enough to rattle the soldiers, Taylor said.

"Just because a vehicle appears to be able to withstand the effects of explosion ... the effects on the inside of a vehicle are still somewhat dramatic," he said.

That's why simply adding extra armour – as the Canadian military did to its LAV III's last fall – is not the solution to protecting soldiers from roadside bombs, Taylor said. "You cannot protect 100 per cent people by simply putting armour between them and the device."

Starting this summer, soldiers will become gumshoes to better track the insurgents behind the bombs. A new unit of soldiers, with backgrounds in forensics, explosive analysis and electronics will be in place to examine roadside bombs – exploded or not – to look for the "signatures," the telltale clues that can help pinpoint the person who made the weapon.

At the moment, Canada has to rely heavily on its coalition partners in Kandahar to do

the work.

"If you're a *CSI* fan, it's going to be *CSI* Kandahar. It will be able to do the full range of capabilities, biometrics, electronics, chemical analysis, explosive analysis," Lavoie said. "It's like any sort of crime scene. Traces are left behind that we can, just like a police investigative crime scene, try to find the bread crumbs that will lead back to the bad guys."

He says much of the counter-IED work is akin to law enforcement, noting an IED cell "is really a bunch of organized serial criminals."

And soldiers are getting a little help from above. Fleets of unmanned surveillance planes fly the skies with a constant eye on the ground and this summer the military plans to install tethered balloons and towers with sensors and high-tech cameras around Canadian bases in Kandahar.

Lavoie says there is some evidence the combined efforts are working. Insurgents are having to plant more bombs to achieve a similar level of "success" in striking coalition forces.

"We're still taking casualties and that's not good but they're working harder to do it and if they have to work harder to do it, the more energy we cause them to expend and the better chance we're going to catch them," he said.

Tomorrow: *The story of Petty Officer James Leith who came face-to-face with an IED, survived and saved others.*

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