

# Keen wits and sharp bayonet defuse Afghan bomb

By EVA HOARE Staff Reporter  
Wed. Aug 19 - 4:46 AM



Military specialist Jim Leith was awarded the Star of Courage for using his bayonet to disarm a bomb in Afghanistan less than an hour after he survived an explosion that ripped through the vehicle he was riding in.

Jim Leith was admiring the sunrise over an Afghanistan mountain range when a bomb blast tipped off a chain of harrowing events that led him to Rideau Hall and a Star of Courage.

It was Sept. 28, 2006, and little did the bomb disposal specialist know that moments after the bone-rattling explosion ripped through the Bison armoured vehicle he was riding in, he would be bending over another bomb, on the same desolate road, with only a bayonet to dismantle it.

"I was thinking, this isn't such a bad old day, and just when I was thinking that, the lights went out," the petty officer (second class) recalled. "There was that sensation of being airborne."

The sensation was correct. The force of the blast ripped open the Bison like a tin can, hurling it nine metres into the air. It landed, tilted on its side against a wall that lined the road.

He escaped unhurt. Within minutes, he discovered a second bomb.

U.S. Apache helicopters were soon roaring overhead. Fellow Canadian and American soldiers he'd been with on that morning's mission were standing guard 100 metres back.

The Dartmouth-based specialist wanted to dismantle the second improvised explosive device so he could get evidence against the insurgents who planted it and the first bomb.

He crawled to the IED. Leaning over, he gently brushed away the hot, sandy dirt from the device meant to kill him and his comrades.

"You're thinking a hundred thoughts," Petty Officer Leith said Monday, remembering that dawn morning, a third of the way into the group's 72 bomb-clearing missions in the hard-fought Pashmul district.

"If it goes off, I'll never feel it," he said, thinking he would just be a puff of "pink mist" if the bomb did its job.

He was also thinking about his number two operator, Cpl. Jim Lightle, who had been medevaced out within a couple of minutes of the first explosion. The corporal's leg had been "shattered," remembered Petty Officer Leith, a navy clearance diver and explosive ordnance disposal operator.

Fortunately, his friend was rushed into surgery at the hospital at Kandahar Airfield and was later airlifted to a forces hospital in Germany.

For Petty Officer Leith, the task of dismantling the double-stacked IED remained. He had to see if it was booby-trapped.

Sometimes, insurgents aren't content with one or two bombs, they'll add a grenade underneath for good measure, he said.

"I'd just got my bell rung 40 minutes ago," he said. "You've got to make the lonely walk (to the IED). Somebody's gotta do it."

Dirt brushed away, he cut a wire connected to the IED that had been buried under the dirt.

The earlier blast had destroyed his sophisticated dismantling gear, so he turned to his bayonet.

Using the "nice, sharp pointy end," Petty Officer Leith rendered the Taliban's IED useless.

He won't reveal exactly how he did it.

"We're all . . . trained to do certain things with certain tools. We can't let them in on our playbook."

By then, it was 10:30 a.m., a few hours after the U.S.-led operation was aborted by the first explosion.

With the bomb defused, it was time to head to a nearby field hospital where Petty Officer Leith and his mates were checked out by medics. They also had to rustle up some new gear.

"We had another mission that night."

A full day later, the ringing in his head from the explosion had subsided. His aches and pains were on the wane.

"When that primary blast wave impacts your body, you feel smashed," he said.

In the months ahead, there'd be more missions for him and his comrades, but luckily no more blasts.

"We had a lot hairier days than that. . . . Anybody who says they're not scared, I'd like to meet them."

In March 2007, he came home and the news of his heroism soon followed.

The petty officer said he tried to keep it all "under the radar" but jokingly blames his commanding officer, Maj. Mark Gasparotto (in charge of 23 Field Squadron), for creating some buzz about the incident.

In January, a call came to report to the admiral's office in Halifax where he learned that Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean would be soon pinning the Star of Courage on his lapel.

The medal is awarded to those who perform acts of "conspicuous courage in circumstances of great peril."

"It was surreal," he said of the June day at Rideau Hall.

Now back to instructing at the Fleet Diving Unit (Atlantic) in Shearwater, he's quick to shrug off the accolades, instead pointing to the life-threatening work carried out by fellow coalition forces.

And it's possible he might re-join them someday.

"If I'm asked to go, I'll go."

( [ehoare@herald.ca](mailto:ehoare@herald.ca) )