

Navy team combs Afghan dust for clues from bombs

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The Navy's underwater demining specialists are diving into the dust of Afghanistan, and their efforts are being heralded as heroic and life saving.

"The application of the type of naval de-mining training that they have is quite applicable in Afghanistan. They're everyday heroes over there, saving the lives of Canadian Forces personnel, and allies and Afghans," Defence Minister Peter MacKay says.

Lt.-Cmdr. Roland Leyte once spent three weeks combing the depths of Peggy's Cove off the Nova Scotia coast, recovering body parts and smashed pieces of the airliner that was once Swissair flight 111, and has plumbed the black, debris-infested waters of Louisiana's inter-coastal waterway, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, in search of survivors.

But Leyte's greatest challenge, after a decade and a half as a navy scuba diver specializing in bomb disposal, has come on the landlocked, battle-scarred terrain of southern Afghanistan. It started in earnest on March 22, 2006, and would end later that year - literally in the line of Taliban fire on a day when four more of his Canadian comrades would lose their lives.

On his first assignment, Leyte was struck by the size of the hole before him. Two metres deep and five wide, it was the product of four Russian-built anti-tank mines hooked to a radio-controlled detonator. Four of his Canadian comrades lost their lives there hours earlier while riding in their G-Wagon.

For the next 90 minutes, Leyte and his team of forensic experts gathered four garbage bags of evidence - bits and pieces of the bomb and the all-important radio detonator - strewn along the dusty track that skimmed along a creek bed north of Kandahar City.

Before they boarded their American Black Hawk helicopter to return to their small laboratory at Kandahar Airfield, they had one more job: carefully removing the remains of the slain soldiers and zipping them into body bags.

"I'd rather not do it ever again in my life," Leyte recalls.

MacKay met some of the divers who have followed in Leyte's footsteps on his recent Christmas trip to Kandahar. Faced with the budget cuts of the 1990s, the navy assumed the bulk of the bomb disposal duties of the other branches of the Canadian Forces.

Then came Afghanistan.

At first, the Forces relied on their allies to supply explosive ordnance disposal expertise. But, as the threat of improvised explosive devices and roadside bombs has grown, the navy was called on for its expertise.

Of the 76 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat killed in Afghanistan, 32 fell victim to IEDs. Suicide bombers killed another 12 and the diplomat.

"In each rotation we send about 50 sailors, of whom a small, small few are naval explosive ordnance disposal divers," explains Cmdr. Jeff Agnew, a senior navy spokesman.

With U.S. and British specialists, the Canadian divers are part of a forensic and intelligence-gathering unit called the Combined Explosives Exploitation Cell.

"It's a fairly secretive little organization," says Agnew. "Think of the TV show, CSI." The dangerous work of Leyte and his colleagues is the first link in an intelligence-gathering chain that leads to Bagram Air Base, north of Kabul, where U.S. intelligence experts enter the bomb scene data into a massive database.

Leyte has a specific checklist that focuses on the bomb itself: What type? How did it explode? What type of switch made it fire? Was it remotely controlled, or was it triggered by pressure from a tire or foot, like a traditional anti-personnel mine? That information, along with the bomb's key electronics, is shipped to Bagram for further analysis.

The results help answer several key questions: Who built the bomb? Where did the materials come from? Who might have bankrolled it? And who specifically was the bomber - an assassin triggering a detonator from afar or a suicide attacker?

"A crime scene in North America, you can lock it down for 24 hours to a couple of days. Afghanistan, because it's a war zone, we only get 30 to 90 minutes to get everything we can get and basically take all your forensics and get on the helicopter again."

Unlike the television program, Leyte doesn't know what came out of the evidence he gathered. Did it help locate a network of al-Qaida or Taliban insurgents, or did the collection of a fingerprint or strand of DNA prevent a NATO coalition base from being infiltrated by a terrorist posing as a local worker?

All he knows for sure is that an American colonel he used to work for once told him his work "was helping us find the network and stop the network."

Over his seven-month posting, Leyte noticed the bombs getting more powerful to match the strength of the armoured vehicles and tanks that the Forces have been shipping over to protect soldiers.

"The IEDs themselves are fairly unsophisticated. They take some time, they dig the hole . . . they run their switch off to the side," says Leyte. "They own the land; they know where we are moving from and to."

Leyte's final mission - he'd done more than 70 by then - was nearly his last in uniform. He was a little more than a week away from the end of his tour of duty when he boarded a convoy for a grim two-hour ride west to the volatile Panjwahi district.

It was Aug. 3, 2006, and another comrade had been killed when the armoured vehicle he was driving rolled across one of three lightly buried IEDs. The bomb exploded directly under the driver, breaching the hull of his vehicle.

As Leyte and his team arrived, the scene suddenly exploded in a hail of gunfire. Canadian troops, only 100 metres from the blast site, became embroiled with the Taliban only 500 metres away behind a large wall.

Leyte's team sized up the situation quickly: they found two remaining holes with unsophisticated bombs. One was still live and very much a threat.

Amid the gunfire, Leyte and a fellow bomb tech attached plastic explosives to the unexploded bomb and ran it to the front lines - a large mud wall that separated the Canadians from the Taliban enemy. Leyte set the time-delayed fuse and dove for cover with the soldiers.

"It was not like anything I'd ever done before."

By the time the dust settled three hours later, three more Canadian troops were dead. In part, they were protecting Leyte and his team. But their main objective was chasing a Taliban target that eventually eluded them in the nearby mud-walled maze.

"It was good days and bad days in Afghanistan. That was a bad day. You get together with friends to talk about it, and you move on to the next day," Leyte recalls.

"All I know is when I left, the 12th of August, I breathed a sigh of relief as I was lifting off on my last day in Afghanistan."

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