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Taliban bomber wrecks CIA's shadowy war

Christina Lamb

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A middle-aged mother of three and a warm-hearted man called Harold are a long way from the image most Americans have of their top spies in one of the wildest regions of Afghanistan.

But they will be among the seven stars added this week to the 90 on the Memorial Wall at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, after a Taliban suicide bomber killed seven agents and wounded six at a CIA base in eastern Afghanistan. The attack has thrown the CIA's whole strategy into disarray.

The clandestine nature of the agents' work means the stars carry no names. The few details that have emerged since Wednesday's attack have, however, lifted the veil on the most shadowy aspect of the war in Afghanistan.

The bombing took place at Forward Operating Base Chapman in the volatile province of Khost, which borders Pakistan. The area is dominated by Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin, perhaps Afghanistan's most deadly warlords.

Although Chapman was officially a camp for civilians involved in reconstruction, it was well-known locally as a CIA base. Over the past couple of years, it focused on gathering information on so-called high-value targets for drone attacks, the unmanned missile planes that have played a growing role in taking out suspected terrorists since President Barack Obama took office. The Haqqanis were their principal target.

"That far forward they were almost certainly from the CIA's paramilitary rather than analysts," said one agent.

The head of this intelligence-gathering operation was a mother of three. Although the Chapman base chief has not been named, she was described as a loving mother and an inspiration by a fellow CIA mum.

“She was a dear friend and a touchstone to all of the mums in CTC [counter-terrorism],” she said.

Another CIA official said the base chief had worked on Afghanistan and counter-terrorism for years, dating back to the agency’s so-called Alec Station. That unit was created to monitor Osama Bin Laden five years before the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Wednesday’s bomb wiped away decades of experience. Eight years into the war, the agency is still desperately short of personnel who speak the language or are knowledgeable about the region.

“It’s a devastating blow,” said Michael Scheuer, a former agent and head of Alec Station. “We lost an agent with 14 years’ experience in Afghanistan.”

A CIA investigation is under way into how the bomber was able to circumvent security at the base, apparently passing unchecked through an outer perimeter manned by Afghan contractors to enter the gym and detonate his explosive vest. He was said to be wearing Afghan army uniform, but the Afghan Ministry of Defence has denied he was a member of the security forces.

What is clear, given the number of CIA agents at the meeting, is that he was considered an important informant. One agent had flown in specially from Kabul.

The only victim to have been publicly identified was Harold Brown, a 37-year-old father of three, whose mother Barbara thought he worked for the State Department.

“He wanted to make the world a better place,” she said, recounting how he would take clothes outgrown by his two-year-old and give them to Afghan children. She added that he often told her: “My most important things in life are God, my family and my country.”

The attack has left the agency in a quandary, according to Gary Berntsen, a CIA officer for 23 years who led a team to Tora Bora to try to capture Bin Laden.

“The job is gathering human intelligence and for that you have to meet people whether it’s on or off a facility,” he said.

“In the old days when we were running Russian operations, if you had a double agent the worst that happened was he feeds you false information. These days if you have a double agent he detonates in your face.”

The attack raises fresh doubts about coalition plans to turn over security to Afghans to enable western troops to leave.

“This calls into question the whole strategy of using Afghans to guard the perimeter of camps,” said Scheuer.

Both the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban have claimed credit for the attack. The Afghan Taliban said one of their men had infiltrated the Afghan army; the Pakistani group said the bomber was a CIA informer who had switched sides.

One military official said the bombing may have been retaliation for a US push against the Haqqani network. American officials have been putting pressure on Pakistan to send troops to take on the Haqqanis, but the Pakistani military has refused to comply.

The Haqqani network is also thought to have been behind Friday's bombing at a volleyball match at Shah Hassan Khel in Pakistan in which 96 villagers were killed. The attack is believed to be in revenge for the formation of an anti-Taliban militia. More than 600 people have died in bombings in Pakistan since last October.

? Afghanistan's parliament dealt a rebuke to President Hamid Karzai yesterday, rejecting 17 of his 24 nominees for a new cabinet, including a powerful warlord and the country's only female minister.