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Death by IED: the hidden killer stalking Nato's frontline troops

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Anthony Loyd, Arghandab Valley in Afghanistan

The skinny sniper from Arizona, Sergeant Brandon Pilguy, knows the ground beneath his feet feels terribly wrong. “Hey, I’m treading on something squishy,” he says, matter-of-factly.

His expression is uneasy and puzzled, rather than afraid — but his words have an instant effect on the 12 paratroopers from the US 82nd Airborne seated on the steps of the school courtyard not more than ten feet away.

The men, smoking and laughing and talking about basketball, are covered in sweat and dust. They have been at the school all day while a three-man explosive ordnance demolition (EOD) team toils under the blazing sun to clear it of bombs.

Seven improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have been found buried in the school courtyard and carefully destroyed.

Now, late in the afternoon, the day’s work seems done. Their commander is exhausted with heat and the effort of concentration. He is drenched in sweat and can barely speak. Neither he nor anyone else wants to hear the words “treading on something squishy” — because that means a change in the ground pressure under the sole of Sergeant Pilguy’s foot.

In that schoolyard at Kuhak, in the southwestern edge of the Arghandab valley, Kandahar province, “squishy” means pressure plate; “squishy” means that Sergeant Pilguy is standing on a mine.

It is a long time since any child took a lesson at the school. Instead, the building has become a symbolic battlefield; a single square in the chessboard which represents the writ of government, across which the Taliban and US paratroopers vie for control with improvised bombs and various countermeasures.

In January, on the track approaching the school gates, the previous commander of A Company, 2/508th Parachute Infantry, was killed along with his EOD team leader when a device comprising nine hidden “daisy-chain” rockets detonated beside them. Six soldiers were seriously wounded.

An Afghan farmer lost his foot to a mine in a wheatfield beside the school a fortnight ago. A US special forces soldier was killed by a roadside bomb in the vicinity last week. The last time the soldiers cleared the school, at the end of April, they found 11 bombs in and around the yard and a tripwire device among the nearby crops. On that occasion no one was hurt, but the bomb disposal team’s Talon robot was blown up by a mine.

“We want to open the school and they don’t want us in there — it’s as simple as that,” says the EOD commander, Technical Sergeant Neil Newman. “It boils down to the counter-insurgency thing. If I had my way I’d blow the whole school. One day our luck will run out.”

Across the nearby Arghandab river, B Company’s luck is already on the wane. Thirty men — nearly a third of their strength — have been killed or wounded by improvised bombs or mines since the unit arrived there in December.

There are many methods used to set off the bombs along the Arghandab Valley, the key terrain controlling the water supply to Kandahar city that will be one of the districts Nato forces will be trying to take control of this summer. Command-wire bombs are the most common, and the most feared by the EOD.

“If you can’t find what’s at the end of it then you’ve no control over the situation or the bomb,” says Sergeant Newman, who estimates that he has disposed of more than 150 devices during three tours in Iraq and the past two months in Afghanistan. “The Taleban watch what we do and see how we operate. If they get a chance to blow a device that we are on the end of, they will.”

Tripwires are on the increase, too, in the wheat fields on higher ground in the Arghandab. Paratroopers have discovered devices made using regular military tripwire, as well as cord coloured brown and yellow to be camouflaged among the crops and spring flowers. Last year US troops in the Arghandab, an area renowned for its pomegranate orchards, found bombs disguised as fruit rigged to tripwires, hanging among the orchards at head height.

On the day *The Times* visits Kuhak, the midday sun drags the temperature past 38C (100F) — so hot that Sergeant Newman would have felt like he was being boiled alive had he worn the 80lb of protective armour mythologised in the Hollywood film *The Hurt Locker*. Like so many US soldiers in Afghanistan, he finds the film’s glamorised inaccuracies risible. “Fall over in this heat in that suit and you’ll never get up — you’ll be stuck like a turtle,” he says.

None of the devices found in the school has much metal in it and, in any case, the ground is already ploughed with shrapnel — so the disposal team’s metal detector is all but useless. Most bombs are found by a man grubbing around the schoolyard on his hands and knees, probing the soil with a titanium rod; bareheaded, with no more protection than a pair of gloves, ballistic glasses and a regular flak jacket.

Every so often he places a charge of plastic explosive against a bomb and takes cover. “Fire in the hole!” he shouts, and they all stick their fingers in their ears and hunch against the clods of earth and chunks of rock that go flying.

The sky is cloudless. Distant mountains shine gold and blue. An occasional breeze whispers through the wheatfields around the school. The wind makes one of the bomb team’s dogs — Urmel, a Belgian shepherd — prick up his ears and “point” to the rustling sheaves, reminding us, as if any have forgotten, of what lies among them.

“He can smell the trip wire devices,” says Sergeant Jeremiah Mason. “Good dog, that. Nice temperament. Plenty of drive. Nose like a coke addict.”

The other bomb dog, a black shepherd bitch, seems broken and shellshocked. Each explosion terrifies her. It is not just humans who break under the stress.

Finally, eight hours after he began clearing the schoolyard, Sergeant Newman had blown the last device. He had leant back against the wall, almost speechless. The job was finished. Then Sergeant Pilguy trod on something “squishy”.

He lifts his foot before anyone can stop him — the action that usually sets off the explosive. Beneath it is a black mine, a PMN, its black cap just visible in the dust. One of the most feared of anti-personnel mines, the PMN was mass produced by the Soviet Union and used extensively throughout Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation.

This one is a little different. Linked directly beneath it by a detonation cord dug into the soil is a 20lb bomb built with home-made explosives and laced with shrapnel — which includes, with some irony, cogs from the disposal squad’s robot that was blown up here in April.

But the device does not explode. No one knows why.

“The PMN only needs a couple of ounces of pressure to detonate,” Sergeant Newman says ten minutes later, after he has destroyed the bomb. He examines the crater: “It should have blown his foot off and detonated the main charge, which would have annihilated him.”

Sergeant Pilguy squats down beside the new crater to be photographed by his friends as if he is on holiday; earth from the explosion splattered across the ceiling and walls behind him where his flesh and bones should have been. “We would have recovered maybe 80 per cent of his body,” Sergeant Newman says, wondering at it all. “In chunks like this.”

He picks up a water bottle. “Of the other 12 guys nearby I’d say five of you would’ve been KIA [killed in action], the rest seriously injured. Ruptures. Shrapnel.

“Three times out of ten it’s just luck. I try not think about it until later,” he says.