

Navy diver helps bring Taliban bombing secrets to surface (Afghanistan)

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan -- Petty Officer (first class) John Smith marvels at his good fortune. Trained as a navy clearance diver, the Haligonian says he's having the time of his life working 700 kilometres away from the ocean in what he fondly calls "the sandbox."

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Smith has one of the most dangerous jobs in what has become the most volatile corner of Afghanistan.

The sailor, whose superiors would not allow his real name to be used or for him to be photographed, is the top Canadian in a secretive cell of combat engineers who study how and where the Taliban place landmines and improvised explosive devices and what they use to build these lethal weapons and trigger them.

Amassing this institutional knowledge is vital because the most effective way the Taliban has found to kill coalition soldiers has been to attack their convoys with suicide bombers or to place mines and IEDs on or near the roads and dirt tracks those convoys travel on.

Of the eight Canadian soldiers who have died here since Ottawa switched its military focus from Kabul to Kandahar last year, four of them were killed in such hit-and-run attacks. A Canadian diplomat was also killed in a suicide bombing.

While quick to volunteer that Efront line units and army combat engineers attached to them here were in even more danger than him or his team, ESmith added, "Everything we deal with is unstable."

"I think the public is very interested in what we do. Unfortunately, we can't really talk about it in any detail. We don't want the enemy to know what we know, because they would change it," he said.

The cell where Smith works alongside specialists from several other western countries is responsible for the pivotal work of analysing and devising ways to prevent suicide bombings and other IED attacks against coalition forces and Afghans in the province of Kandahar, where the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry operates. To acquire this knowledge, the unit is Erushed out with a multi-national Rapid Reaction Force to the neighbouring provinces of Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul whenever there is an attack involving IEDs.

"This is the pointy end of the stick," Smith said.

"What you can see here in a few weeks equals what I might see in my whole career in Halifax. If there is a gunfight the Taliban don't stand a chance. So, it's generally guerilla warfare.

"Guys who drive the vehicles may be low level, may be pushed into it, but the others are pretty indoctrinated and are willing to do just about anything."

Except for a small anchor on his tan battle fatigues, and his navy-issue 9-mm Sig-Sauer side arm, Smith looks like every Canadian soldier here. How a career sailor ended up giving up the sea for "a hootch" in the desert is something surprised infantrymen and army engineers ask Smith about all the time.

"My primary job is to clear harbours of surface mines, drifting mines and bottom mines, basically any explosive device in the water," Smith said.

It's a special skill set that the army, which was skeptical at first, has turned to the navy for help with because after being stretched to the limit by 15 years of non-stop tours in such places as the Balkans, Africa and Afghanistan, there are no longer enough army combat engineers to go around.

So all but one of the six Canadian combat engineers studying this arcane but vital piece of the battlefield in Afghanistan and suggesting remedies are, like Smith, navy divers.

"What is happening now is exactly what we expected," Smith said.

"From a soldier or a sailor's point of view, we knew that there would be a spring offensive after the cultivation of the poppy crop.

"The Taliban are quite good at what they do. Any good enemy will exploit your weaknesses and they are adept at changing their procedures."

Smith's boss is a British army major who learned "the game" in Northern Ireland and Iraq. Like Smith, the ammunition specialist would not allow his real name to be published for security reasons. Like Smith, he also would not get into the specifics of what it is that his cell is learning about the Taliban.

"The level of sophistication in Afghanistan compared to Iraq is different although both improvise a lot with old Soviet weapons," the major said.

"There are different cultures and slightly different mindsets. Iraq had training regimes that were institutionalized. That is not the case here. This is much less developed. It is mostly a rural environment with different terrain.

"But that is not to say that the Taliban are not successful. But we are good at countering them, too. In counter-insurgency it is always cat-and-mouse. We're the cat. I think that they are very brave and know what they are doing, but I would not want to be the mouse."

While it was impossible to quantify, the major and Smith were both sure that lives had been saved because of what their anti-IED cell was doing.

Between training in tunnels and caves in New Brunswick and learning basic infantry skills in Alberta, it's been nearly one year now since Smith last went diving. However, the petty officer will see the sea briefly again soon. When he takes his Afghan leave, he and his wife plan to embark on Ea cruise.

Smith and the other Canadian navy divers serving here are to leave "the sandbox" for home in a few months. A fresh batch of navy divers from Nova Scotia and British Columbia have already received orders to replace them.

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