

Air Force EOD technicians are saving US, Iraqi, and Afghan lives—but at enormous costs to themselves.

Airmen in the Hurt Locker

By Aaron Church, Associate Editor

Improvised explosive devices are the enemy's weapon of choice in Iraq and Afghanistan. To combat the deadly threat posed by IEDs, the Air Force's explosive ordnance disposal career field has been thrust into an unexpectedly central role in today's wars.

Self-described as a "square peg" in an Air Force focused on aircraft, EOD's pre-9/11 combat history centered on clearing bases of unexploded bombs after they came under attack. They were a small, rarely used, and little-known service specialty. Now, combat is the norm and the statistics are telling.

Fourteen EOD airmen have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2005, making it one of the most hazardous professions in the Air Force. In just five years, the Air Force has awarded more than 70 Purple Hearts to EOD techs, with some airmen earning more than one.

TSgt. Alejandro Rodriguez makes notes during a mission in Afghanistan. EOD airmen in the field today must be infantrymen and forensic detectives as well as bomb technicians.

USAF photos

Operations in Iraq have largely quieted compared to the situation a few years back, but “the scenarios in Afghanistan are a lot more aggressive,” said SSgt. Roger Hughes, an EOD technician with the 20th Civil Engineer Squadron EOD Flight, Shaw AFB, S.C. TSgt. Alejandro Rodriguez, just back from a nine-month tour in Afghanistan, said the Taliban isn’t afraid “to go toe-to-toe with you in a fight.”

Just south of Kabul, in Afghanistan’s Logar province, Rodriguez noted, “troublemaker” villagers in the region kick into high gear every summer, harassing the Army’s nearby combat teams, mining roads, setting ambushes at key choke points, and keeping EOD techs in high demand.

Buried along the roadways, IEDs—ranging from mere plastic bottles with homemade explosives to large artillery shells—are invisible even to Rodriguez’ trained eye, forcing him to rely on hard-earned experience to keep himself, his team, and allied forces alive.

If you’re only looking for IEDs, he said, “you’re going to be surprised.”

EOD teams have to think like the enemy, accounting for every detail of the terrain and situation—bottlenecks, exposed areas, culverts—identifying ideal ambush points, always imagining the worst. This requires intuition and initiative. The only real way to find a device before it finds you, Rodriguez noted, is up close. “If you assume that your vehicles are going to do the work, then unfortunately, ... you’re going to lose a lot of vehicles and possibly get a lot of people hurt,” he said.

Despite a convoy of mine-resistant vehicles, ground-penetrating radar, metal detectors, and robots, success requires leading the convoy on foot. “Dismounts” are the way business is done in Afghanistan.

As the summer fighting season began in Logar province, Rodriguez’ team was tasked to lead a route-clearance package through an area well-known for enemy activity. Little more than a dirt path, the road scarcely left room for a mine-resistant, ambush-protected (MRAP) armored vehicle or Buffalo ordnance disposal vehicle to maneuver.

Turning off the secure road, Rodriguez and the dismount team set to work clearing the embankments, alert for key indicators such as command wires or signs of recent disturbance—the hallmarks of a hidden IED. The vehicles attracted little enemy attention, trundling along at a walking pace. The Buffalo’s job of digging up an explosive charge begins only after EOD

has found and disabled a device. The enemy is clever, has grown accustomed to the patterns and tactics of clearance convoys, and knows full well that the operation depends on the dismount team.

One False Step

As the team approached the road, machine-gun fire erupted from concealed positions.

“They wanted to keep us ... away from the road so that we couldn’t detect those indicators,” Rodriguez said. The enemy slipped away and tried to trick the EOD team into thinking it had the upper hand, then attacked from another direction. It’s a common tactic—“just a constant back and forth harassment.”

Pinned down several times by heavy machine-gun fire, Rodriguez relentlessly pushed onward. Despite the enemy’s efforts, he managed to locate the IED.

As soon as he began disabling the device, a sniper’s bullet rang out, narrowly missing him.

“What I first thought was, ‘Get down. I don’t want to get shot.’” Very much alone,

exposed, and sharing cover with an IED, “you know that just one false step and it could be ‘game over,’” he recalled. “Some guy [is] trying to get a bead on me right now, and I’m not really sure where he’s shooting from.”

Forty-five tense minutes of machine-gun and sniper fire stranded Rodriguez in the open, before a momentary lull permitted a call for air support. An F-15E arrived quickly overhead, making four passes.

“Just the presence of air support is enough,” said Rodriguez. Though the pilot was unable to pinpoint the enemy using the Strike Eagle’s Sniper targeting pod, the thunderous “show of force” sent the insurgents scurrying for cover, buying a transient moment of calm.

Fighter aircraft “are in high demand, so usually they don’t stick around. ... I [had] a small window to get this done,” remembered Rodriguez. Working briskly, he carefully removed the IED’s initiator, signaling the Buffalo to unearth the explosive charge with its rake-like mechanical arm. As the



SSgt. Roger Hughes is helped into an 85-pound bomb disposal suit during training at Shaw AFB, S.C. With incessant deployments, EOD shops are in constant flux, meaning home duties and training take the hit.



The arm on a Buffalo mine-protected vehicle reaches for a suspected IED. Buffalos can make it safer to unearth an IED but cannot replace a trained EOD technician's ability to distinguish hazards on foot.

Buffalo gingerly lowered the charge to the side of the road, a tracked robot scuttled over, expertly manipulated by the airmen, and deftly disabled the bomb.

We “got it pulled out of the road, got it destroyed, and then we were able to press on. ... [It was] really stressful, ... but we had to just make the best we could out of it,” recalled Rodriguez. “As soon as the birds left, they started shooting again, but we were cleared.”

While EOD makes great demands on airmen and extracts a heavy toll, the job satisfaction and camaraderie are exceptional.

“We are an extremely close-knit community,” said SSgt. Eric Farley of the 22nd Civil Engineer Squadron EOD Flight, McConnell AFB, Kan. Placing your life in the hands of a teammate demands absolute trust, he noted.



Widely disparate ranks must be able to talk to each other as equals on the team, he said, because “each person’s life is dependent upon the other. ... The newest guy can see things” that a higher-ranking veteran might not.

Combat only accentuates the bond, added SSgt. Beau Chastain, 22nd CES EOD equipment noncommissioned-officer-in-charge, at McConnell. “You form a bond with people that is unlike any other. ... By the time you’re done, you’re basically all brothers.”

With three deployments to Iraq, two to Afghanistan, and one to Saudi Arabia between them, Farley and Chastain are the norm within the EOD community. For most in their shop, if they haven’t already earned an Air Force Combat



Action Medal, “then we’ve qualified for it, and the paperwork just hasn’t been submitted yet,” Chastain noted.

More satisfying still is witnessing the gratitude of people whose lives have been snatched from destruction.

“You get to see immediate results,” Chastain said, adding that in Iraq, entire families are often targeted by insurgents. “When you go and save the guy’s home and everything he owns ... from being destroyed, you get to see firsthand the thanks that they have for you. ... You can look the guys in the face that you just helped to save—it’s instantly rewarding.”

Above: Rodriguez wades through an irrigation canal in Afghanistan’s Logar province, following thin copper wires stretching between a trigger device and a well-hidden IED. Left: Hughes surveys the rubble-strewn crater left from a detonation near Tikrit, Iraq.



Rodriguez and an armor-clad fellow EOD technician assess options for destroying an explosive device during a long-range reconnaissance sweep in Afghanistan.

Airmen have occasionally even rescued entire villages from situations where insurgents have “land-mined every road going in and out,” charging villagers a toll to enter or leave, Farley said.

“If you’re able to take care of all that and open those roads back up and get commerce moving again in and out of towns,” or get ground forces under way again after they were stopped dead in their tracks by an IED, it’s “a rewarding feeling,” Farley said. “You show up, do your job, and the mission continues,” Chastain added.

Minute Men

The volume of IEDs encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan quickly overwhelmed DOD and coalition capacity to protect ground forces, demanding that the Air Force help fill the gap. Instantly, EOD’s role blossomed from support to one of front-line combat as well. In the ground-based battle, “the pilots aren’t on the front lines,” Chastain pointed out. This has demanded a revolution of thinking as well as training.

“It’s pretty ridiculous to talk now about what we were doing back in the day,” said Hughes, the EOD technician from Shaw who had just returned from a third tour in Iraq.

“In ’05, we had just basic Humvees with a steel plate welded to the door and an ATV rack on the back with our robot. We looked like the Beverly Hillbillies running around Iraq disarming IEDs.”

He said, “It took our people a little bit to realize what was going on out there.”

When attached to an Army or Marine unit, “[if] it’s their job to go through neighborhoods kicking in doors, well, guess where we’re going?” Chastain said.

Austere forward operating bases with-in firing distance of the enemy—rather

than improved air bases with their associated comforts and support services—are the new reality for EOD teams.

“From leaving our post and on our way to an IED, we are infantry. Once we arrive, we’re EOD techs,” Chastain stressed.

The EODs have a daunting menu of skills to master. They must be familiar with the idiosyncrasies of many nations’ munitions; must know how to safely disarm a bomb; must have extensive knowledge of electronics; and must have combat infantry skills such as small-squad tactics and mountain warfare—and apply it all often in the course of a single mission.

EOD airmen have had to swiftly adapt their training to seamlessly integrate with Army, Marine Corps, or even British or Canadian security teams in the field. What other units train for months to be able to do, EOD must do in minutes.

From the time airmen are briefed by a security team to the time they walk out the door as an element of that team may be as little as 15 minutes. Thanks to improved combat training and experience, the EODs understand the ground forces’ briefings and can help verify a plan for the mission, Hughes explained, asserting that now, “we don’t have to be just EOD guys; we can be a productive member of that group.”

While training has come a long way, the change in mission has also demanded a change in mindset, with EODs taking much more responsibility for their own safety and the safety of the elements they are embedded with. EOD airmen have had to learn this point the hard way, Rodriguez said.

“We were showing up and assuming the Army knew what they were doing, ... and we were taken on some wild rides. ... We’d say, ‘Take us to that IED,’ ... and before you know it, you arrive on

EOD Airmen Killed in Action in Iraq and Afghanistan

TSgt. Walter M. Moss Jr.
March 29, 2006
Baghdad, Iraq

MSgt. Brad A. Clemmons
Aug. 21, 2006
Taji, Iraq

Capt. Kermit O. Evans Sr.
Dec. 3, 2006
Al Anbar province, Iraq

SrA. Elizabeth A. Loncki
Jan. 7, 2007
Baghdad, Iraq

SrA. Daniel B. Miller Jr.
Jan. 7, 2007
Baghdad, Iraq

TSgt. Timothy R. Weiner
Jan. 7, 2007
Baghdad, Iraq

SrA. William N. Newman
June 7, 2007
Balad, Iraq

TSgt. Anthony L. Capra
April 9, 2008
Golden Hills, Iraq

TSgt. Phillip A. Myers
April 4, 2009
Helmand province, Afghanistan

SSgt. Bryan D. Berky
Sept. 12, 2009
Bala Baluk, Afghanistan

TSgt. Anthony C. Campbell Jr.
Dec. 15, 2009
Helmand province, Afghanistan

TSgt. Adam K. Ginett
Jan. 19, 2010
Kandahar, Afghanistan

SrA. Michael J. Buras
Sept. 21, 2010
Kandahar, Afghanistan

SrA. Daniel J. Johnson
Oct. 5, 2010
Kandahar, Afghanistan

scene and you get out of your truck, and you have an IED staring you right in the face, because they ‘took you to the IED,’” he said. “We had to get smart real quick,” not only integrating into the ground force team but learning to quickly assess whether Army or Marine Corps units are prepared to provide security for an IED removal.



Airmen in Afghanistan lead a route-clearance package on foot, searching for the merest hint of disturbance which may indicate the presence of a hidden IED.

EOD teams have had to become much shrewder. “The attitude has changed. We’re no longer, ‘Hey, I’m EOD. I’m special. You have to take care of me.’ [We’re] an integrated part of that maneuver element, ... and we assume the responsibility for the safety of the unit as well,” Rodriguez observed.

While the work is rewarding, the pace is relentless and the transitions frequent. At McConnell, the cycle is simply a way of life.

“I’ve adjusted to, every nine months, ... packing my stuff and leaving for another six-month deployment,” Farley explained, admitting that “at that nine-month mark, I start to get a little antsy.”

As soon as the EOD techs return from theater, “we’re beginning the mental preparation for the next deployment. It’s a never-ending roller coaster ... of ups and downs,” Chastain added.

The transition between deployment and home station is a strain. In theater, every day is stressful and the tempo frenetic. Checking every street sign, vehicle, and culvert for explosives and scrambling to catch enough sleep to go back out the next day is simply the deployed way of life. “You do that for six months straight and then you come home, and you go from that to boring,” Chastain said.

Repeated every six to nine months, the cycle is jarring in the extreme, and the pace has its price. The return to “normal” life can be tricky. Resetting the mindset from combat to business as usual—only to head almost right back out to combat—is a tremendous challenge. “To me personally, it’s always more nerve-racking coming home than it is leaving to go, because I ... know what to expect when [I] go on a deployment,” Chastain noted.

“Coming home, after six months in an austere environment,” to a wife and small children is something EOD techs are often unprepared for.

“Basically, they have to get to know you again, and you have to get to know them again, because you’re both different people” from when the deployment began.

“If they would give us more civilians to relieve some of that Stateside burden” between deployments, Chastain noted, airmen could do a better job of ramping up for deployments and recovering afterward. A few civilians—two each joining EOD at Shaw and McConnell—have been hired to bring some measure of continuity to the units, which are in constant flux. While most EOD airmen cannot imagine doing any other job, they readily admit that they, their families, and the EOD force as a whole are reaching the point of exhaustion.

Reaching a Critical Point

Retention of senior noncommissioned officers is flagging. That, and combat fatigue among airmen and lack of operational continuity at home stations, are taking their toll on the force.

“Right now, our master sergeant manning level is right around 40 percent,” noted Capt. Dustin Kozlowsky, EOD flight commander at McConnell. The Air Force is so desperate for EOD techs that “we’re not allowed to cross-train into another specialty,” Chastain added. Although the Air Force has attempted to train more airmen into the career field, EOD school is extremely difficult, with an attrition rate as high as 75 percent for enlisted candidates, and 25 percent for officers. For obvious reasons, airmen cannot be rushed through the school; a graduate not fully qualified is potentially disastrous.

“I think the answer is probably not to do that,” Chastain said dryly.

Air Force EODs jumped in to relieve the combat strain on their EOD brethren in the Army and Marine Corps, but they still have their regular Stateside missions, which they take up as soon as they get home. Those include clearing live-fire training ranges and performing protective sweeps for US and foreign heads of state, missions that can come at the rate of “a dozen per week,” Farley said.

With roughly 900 of the total 940 EOD personnel deployed within the last year, EOD techs at home station are stretched too thinly to meet forcewide needs. Some tasks, such as range clearance, simply fall by the wayside.

Combat stress compounds the pressure on EOD techs. “Some of these guys need some serious help. ... I’m talking now PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] or traumatic brain injury” incurred by airmen who have literally lived through explosions, said Rodriguez.

“Our career field right now is reaching a critical point. We have guys that have been put in extremely difficult situations downrange,” and “we need to just do the best we can as an Air Force to alleviate the strain on these guys at home station, so they can have some of that time to reintegrate with their families before they have to just go right back out the door again and do it all over again,” he asserted.

“We’ve sustained and we’ve managed to do the job, [not] because things are great, but it’s just because it’s in our character,” Rodriguez said. The Air Force has taken steps to begin helping EOD specialists. It developed a postdeployment course specifically for EOD airmen. “It did help a lot of individuals to get some things off of their chests,” said Chastain, who went through the course.

In the end, “it just end[ed] up being the camaraderie, just to sit around and talk to one another and share experience we’d gone through and reflect on the good times as opposed to the bad,” Chastain said. Farley said an EOD deployment is a “double-edged sword.” While the techs are pumped up to do the job they’re trained for, and “that, I think I could say, we all enjoy doing, ... if you’re headed out the door and you don’t have that apprehension, if you’re not scared, then there’s something wrong with you,” he said.

EOD is a family, “at least for me,” Hughes admitted. “I’m away from home a lot” leaving behind a wife and little girl, and “it’s getting harder and harder. ... But having these guys around makes it a little easier once we get there.” ■