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Defusing the threat

Marines getting critical info to defeat improvised bombs

BY JEANETTE STEELE, UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2009 AT 1:01 A.M.

In the video-game version of United States versus Afghanistan's insurgents, Camp Pendleton Marines prefer to play the role of the militants.

"They have the upper hand," said Grant Campbell, one of several government employees working at the base to prepare Marines for their most dangerous threat in Afghanistan — the homemade roadside bomb.

In game-playing logic, the insurgents have the advantage. They choose where to attack and the type of booby trap to use. Surprise is on their side.

And the mounting death toll shows that they're good at it.

Last year, 75 percent of attacks against U.S. forces in Afghanistan and 40 percent in Iraq involved the makeshift weapons, known as improvised explosive devices or IEDs. The tactic is as old as Roman times, but came into vogue again because of the guerrilla nature of the current wars.

The carnage from roadside blasts is lessening in Iraq thanks to massive spending by the Pentagon, advances in training, better equipment and infiltration of insurgent networks.

But it's rising quickly in Afghanistan, as America intensifies its focus on that eight-year-old war. This year, more than 1,800 service members have been killed or wounded by IEDs in Afghanistan as of Oct. 31, compared with 944 in all of 2008.

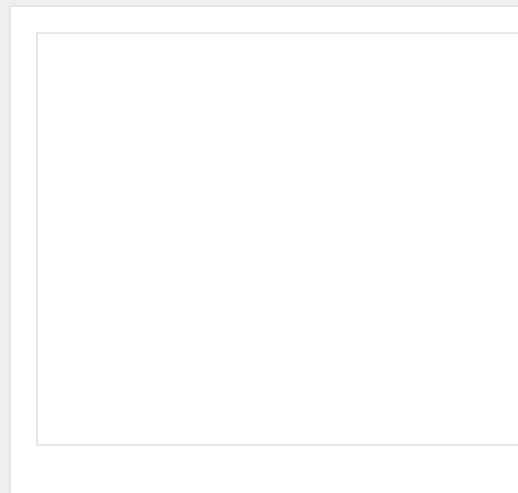
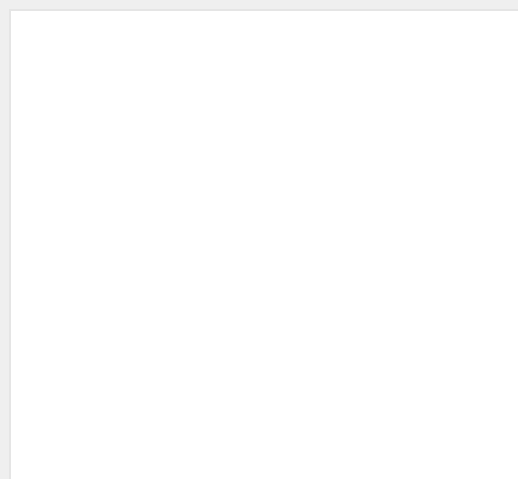
On Thursday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced an intensive, six-month push in which every service member is supposed to brainstorm for new ways to counter these explosives.

As Camp Pendleton-based leaders take command of Marine forces in Afghanistan next year, possibly the most important information provided to their rank and file is how to defeat such bombs.



JOHN GASTALDO / UNION-TRIBUNE

During recent training at Camp Pendleton, Lance Cpl. Michael Dushel (left) and Sgt. John Sampson checked for signs of hidden improvised explosive devices. IEDs remain the biggest killer of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.



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"Afghanistan's terrain certainly lends itself very well to the use of IEDs," said Barry Taylor, executive vice president of HMS Inc., a government consultant on the roadside-bomb threat.

"It is quite a significant factor, the training for the troops to become familiar and able to operate in such a rugged and harsh environment, compared to the more gentle flatlands in Iraq."

The Pentagon is spending \$9.2 million at Camp Pendleton to build a training complex focused on IEDs, one of 57 "home station training lanes" to be built at U.S. military bases. Camp Pendleton's facility, one of the first to go up, should be done by January.

On any given day on the base, Marines walk two by two down a dirt path that looks innocent enough — some scraggly brush here, a discarded food wrapper there, an uneven spot in the middle of the trail.

Government employee Leo Rivera's job is to teach Marines that recognizing any of those signs might save their lives. The list of bomb types is long: radio-controlled, wire-activated, infrared-activated and victim-activated, which means treading on the trigger may be the last step they take.

An instructor points out an "ant trail," a suspicious line in the dirt that could be covering a wire. The glint of metal in the bushes could be the sun hitting a cell phone antenna. Rivera's team has planted mock bombs along the training course.

Marines also receive three to four hours of training on a squat box covered in dials and switches that jams the signals insurgents use to blow up radio-controlled bombs. The box is mounted on Humvees and troop trucks, and there's a backpack version for foot patrols.

These days, the [Marine Corps](#) mantra of "every Marine a rifleman" isn't enough. Every Marine who patrols in Afghanistan needs to know how to work a "jammer."

"The purpose of the IED defeat is to allow the unit to move freely without fear," Rivera said. "It's basically just telling them to be aware of their surroundings, to be vigilant on the indicators."

Rivera, a retired Marine sergeant major, shrugs at the psychological strain caused by the need for hyper-awareness. "Comes with the job," he said.

But the IED menace hit close to his heart last year when Lt. Col. Max Galeai, a former commander of Rivera's, was killed by a suicide bomber in Iraq — an attack that claimed two other Marines.

"I take this very seriously," said Rivera, holding up a thick forearm covered with a tattoo that memorializes fallen comrades. "I've lost friends."

In 2006, the Pentagon formed the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, an agency that now wields a \$3.1 billion annual budget.

Camp Pendleton's \$9.2 million training complex will include Rivera's bomb-identification workshops, "jammer" instruction and other classroom sessions. A new element will be a mock Afghan town where Marines search for signs of bombs and bomb making.

Elsewhere on the base, about \$1.5 million of the Pentagon's anti-IED money recently went toward a more [Hollywood](#) approach.

Enter one of four semi-truck trailers, and you step into the "apartment" of a militant bomb maker. An actor in a traditional Arabic head scarf appears on a movie screen and talks about why he wants to bomb Americans. Afterward, there's a quiz about the tactics he describes. The "apartment" was outfitted by a Los Angeles-area set-design company.

The other trailers also feature a private first class who talks about "thinking like an insurgent" in a video diary, and a staff sergeant who implores his Marines to turn on their electronic jammers when leaving camp.

The final trailer houses a life-size video simulation of a convoy. Half of the Marine unit's members play themselves in a mocked-up Humvee; the others play the insurgent bombers.

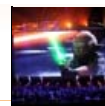
The game is a hit with new Marines, its target audience.

"It puts you in, like, a real scenario. I know it's on a screen and everything, but it's more than we've done in the past," said Lance Cpl. William Bowers, 22. "Before that, we'd just walk through and somebody would say, 'Hey, there's an IED there.'"

Christian Ellis, a former Camp Pendleton machine gunner, is glad to know that training and equipment have improved since he was wounded by a roadside bomb in 2004 outside Fallujah, Iraq.

His Humvee was the last vehicle in the convoy on that day in August. As it passed, an unseen bomber detonated a charge buried deep in the road.

The vehicle flipped, and Ellis was tossed around, blacking out momentarily. Days later, he started suffering



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severe [back pain](#) and had trouble standing. Doctors determined that he had two broken vertebrae.

"We weren't vigilant enough," said Ellis, 26.

His unit was a month from heading home and got complacent, not keeping watch for the wire attached to the charge, he said. It also lacked the mine-resistant armor now used for Humvees.

As for training, Ellis said: "We didn't do too much training, to be honest. We knew the basics."

Ellis, now a student at Mesa College in [San Diego](#), can stand only for short stretches. He takes Vicodin-level medication and receives physical therapy at a Department of Veterans Affairs hospital. He was recently featured in "Fish Out of Water," a film about veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

"It's a lifetime commitment to being careful and watching what I do and constantly being in therapy," Ellis said.

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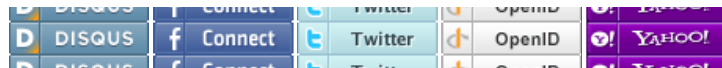
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
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 **lemieuxmc** 11/15/2009 09:43 PM

Good observation on the Humvee SmilinJack.

My up-armored drove like 3 tons of poop on wheels and an EFP will go right on through them. In back of the motor pool they keep the burned out ones under tarps because they don't want GI Joe to know how crappy they are. The new MRAP is a lot better, but the price is ridiculous and they really aren't any more sophisticated than something Billy Ray and Joe Bob whipped up out back of the wrecking yard. It's easy to see example of this, I even have pictures on my FaceBook page.

[Like](#)

 **SmilinJack** 11/15/2009 09:23 PM

Is it just me, or do Humvees look like precisely the wrong type of vehicle to be using where IEDs are common? Turns out the military agrees, and has for some time. This from 2005:

"The Humvee has served the Marine Corps well, but recent conflicts have spotlighted its limitations, Lethin said. "The Humvee was designed as a utility truck for Cold War era, not as a vehicle for combat or direct combat ... We want something that is much better than the Humvee in protection and capability."

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During the past three years, the Marine Corps and the Army have scrambled to upgrade their Humvees with armor protection, in response to the suicide bombers and buried roadside explosives that haunt U.S. troops in Iraq. The added armor, however, has degraded the Humvee's mobility and payload, Lethin said. "Even with an upgraded engine and suspension, we are not getting the payload and capacity we need."

A replacement "combat tactical vehicle" will need to be large enough to seat six passengers and accommodate their gear, he said. By comparison, the Humvee fits four people and its limited space often gets crammed with radios and other hardware.

The Marines will follow a similar approach to the Army's armoring strategy, which calls for trucks to be manufactured with some level of armor protection (the 'A' kit) and will be equipped to handle additional armor (the 'B' kit) if needed. "

Sounds like a big improvement. Wonder where those vehicles are -- funding was expected in 2008.

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Marines+seek+%27c...>

Like



lemieuxmc 11/15/2009 04:09 PM



Comrade_Obama liked this

News Flash: \$9.2 million for IED training...please give me a break.

I went through the Army IED training and it boils down to this; "See that pile of trash over there, that's an IED...or maybe it isn't." When I completed the exercise the rangemaster asked me " How many IED's did you spot on this course soldier?" None sir, I replied, there are only simulated IED's on this course. "Alright smartass, how many simulated IED's did you see?" 27, I said without hesitation. "27... there are only 14 out there!" What about that one, right behind you Sir? So he turned around and looked, "I don't see an IED there!" BOOM! I said, and if I was the insurgent who lived in this sector you would be dead now.

There is NO technology that will defeat the IED threat except completely securing the road/area by killing anyone who comes within 800 meters of it. We aren't going to do that, so it is a waste of U.S. lives (and money) to screw around in Afghanistan with conventional forces. Afghanistan is a classic Special Forces environment where the rules of engagement need to be completely open for our people.

Like



SmilinJack 11/15/2009 08:15 PM [in reply to lemieuxmc](#)

The point is that they're working to IMPROVE IED training, so it's better than what you went through. They don't expect to defeat it. IED training will probably never be perfectly effective, but any significant progress improves the odds.

Like



lemieuxmc 11/15/2009 09:53 PM [in reply to SmilinJack](#)

It's a waste of money! It's like trying to improve a Yugo, you can spend a ton of money and in the end you are still stopped by the side of the road in a POS. It would be better to have a great big "Wheel of IED!" Step right up and give it a spin, round and round it goes, where it stops nobody knows! Clickety, clickety...click....click, BOOM! Oh, so sorry Private Smith, but you're today's loser... too bad, but we have some lovely parting gifts, a prosthetic limb, a Purple Heart and a nicely folded U.S. flag. How about a big round of applause for 19 year old Private Snuffy Smith from Trailerpark City! Hey, he probably wasn't going to have a very happy life anyway.

Like



SmilinJack 11/15/2009 10:09 PM [in reply to lemieuxmc](#)

Again, you missed my point.
My point was...
Oh, what's the point.

Like



woundedmilitarydating 11/15/2009 05:15 PM [in reply to lemieuxmc](#)

I agree in your other post.

Either we drop the nuclear bomb in Afghanistan now or just get out of there. We are wasting our soldiers' lives. It is not our responsibility to take care of OTHER people's country.

Our politicians want to keep us there because their families are not the ones getting killed and getting wounded there. They just want a brush for their ego of not giving up.

If we did not threaten Japan that we would drop the THIRD nuclear bomb in Tokyo, they would NEVER quit.

It worked before. It will still work right now.

It will saves our soldiers' lives.

Like



SmilinJack 11/15/2009 08:19 PM [in reply to woundedmilitarydating](#)

Afghanistan is more or less nuke-proof, because the terrain is mostly mountainous. Mountains suck up nuke blast waves. You'd have to nuke each and every city, and that would create a fallout problem for neighboring countries. Conventional bombs cause about as much damage as you're going to be able to inflict, and we know how effective that's been.

Like



lemieuxmc 11/15/2009 09:35 PM [in reply to SmilinJack](#)

If you study the history of the nuclear weapons program you will see that the U.S. was planning on nuking a Japanese city each week starting in the south and working north until the whole country was nothing but smoking rubble. If you don't believe me look up President Truman's speech about the Potsdam Declaration. We had virtually destroyed many Japanese cities with carpet incendiary bombing in early 1945, nuclear bombs were just the next level of efficiency. Compare what happened at Stalingrad (60k Russians, 60k Germans KIA), Dresden (80k Germans, 1200 Allied aircrew KIA), and Hiroshima (80k Japanese KIA, no American casualties). The end result was the same, except that allied forces lost way less people at Dresden, and none at Hiroshima. It isn't necessary to nuke Afghanistan, you just have to ignore the collateral damage.

And lastly, modern tactical nukes have almost NO fallout! I'm sure that if Akmanutjob gets a nuke and thinks that Iran can get away with dropping it on Tel Aviv, environmental concerns about radioactive fallout will be WAY down his list.

Like



SmilinJack 11/15/2009 09:59 PM [in reply to lemieuxmc](#)

"you just have to ignore the collateral damage"

Pesky civilians.

Like




lemieuxmc 11/16/2009 08:47 AM [in reply to SmilinJack](#)

Technically, Al Qaeda fighters are civilians. They aren't members of a recognized military force, no I.D. card. Read up on the Geneva Accords. Conversely, Al Qaeda would not hesitate to behead you just because you are an infidel, a fair haired leaping gnome, starring in a jihadist movie.

Like

 greg789 11/15/2009 03:19 PM

 LLoveMyFerret and 1 more liked this

In one four day period my rifle company in Vietnam lost 11 men to IEDs - we called them "booby traps". They were mostly rewired 155 and 8 inch rounds. Those 11 men represented about 14 percent of my company. It took an act of will to put your foot down or push a vine out of the way. My unit, the 173rd Airborne Brigade had 1753 killed and about 6000 wounded in 5 1/2 years. We had 12 Medal of Honor recipients, 253 Distinguished Service Crosses and a thousand Silver Stars. It was a waste. Afghanistan is even more hopeless. Killing more brave men is not going to make it better for those already dead and maimed. Get out now.

Like



SmilinJack 11/15/2009 08:12 PM [in reply to greg789](#)

Well said.
Lets leave the job to infiltration, subterfuge, covert ops and drones.


Like


 BigBuck 11/15/2009 01:01 PM

Let's get out of Afghanistan as soon as we find and kill Mullah Omar and bin Laden.

Oh, wait....

Like

 woundedmilitarydating 11/15/2009 11:20 AM

 xians421 liked this

Afghans don't see the US as liberators.

They see us as ALIEN OCCUPIERS.


Bring our troops home.

We should not get involved in the civil war in Afghanistan... just like Vietnam.

Where is Osama Bin Laden anyway? The one that we are supposed to be chasing.

Even if we get Osama Bin Laden or any Al Qaida and Taliban leaders, new leaders will emerge.

Like

 jzatz 11/15/2009 10:43 AM

but think of all the good real life training our troops are getting for when they have to go into Iran!

Like



LaRaza 11/15/2009 11:38 AM [in reply to jzatz](#)

Iran's population is extremely youthful.

There are at least 48 million Iranians under the age of 32, that is enough to give the US a run for its money.

Also, this would further incite the flames of extremism in the Muslim world and foreign fighters would be

pouring in.

Plus, Iranians are fiercely nationalistic.

Like



lemieuxmc 11/15/2009 04:15 PM [in reply to LaRaza](#)

This is why we developed "stand-off" cruise missiles and nuclear warheads. Nothing says Jihad like a mushroom cloud.

Don't knock nuclear bombs, they got the Japanese to surrender AFTER we dropped the SECOND one!

Like



SmilinJack 11/15/2009 08:28 PM [in reply to lemieuxmc](#)

When a country has no effective central government, there's nobody to "surrender". Thus conventional warfare is doomed to failure, since there's no state of "having won", just more (or continued) anarchy/warlords/tribal conflict.

Also, being mountainous, Afghanistan is more or less nuke-proof. You can do as well (or badly) with conventional bombs. Which towns were you planning to incinerate? For the most part, the Taliban doesn't own towns, and where it does, you've got those pesky civilians, and annoying world opinion, to consider. Bummer, eh?

Like



LaRaza 11/15/2009 07:26 PM [in reply to lemieuxmc](#)

Well maybe Iran would then come clean if it does have nuclear capabilities.

Like



woundedmilitarydating 11/15/2009 11:17 AM [in reply to jzatz](#)

TwistableBow liked this

Yeah! Send our troops again to another unnecessary war and have them killed and wounded.

Like



MGINBV 11/15/2009 07:09 AM

xians421 liked this

We need to get our people out of those places...we'll never "win", and who's gonna care if we do, anyway?

Like



ernestoz 11/15/2009 10:01 AM [in reply to MGINBV](#)

You "win" by staying there and providing security to the people until they are able and willing to provide their own security. That may take 20 years or more. Look what happened under Cut and Run Clinton's administration in Somalia. Unless the US is willing to make the commitment, then we should never go into any country, under any circumstances. And yes this is beginning to look a lot like Vietnam, politicians not listening to the guys on the ground.

Like



SmilinJack 11/15/2009 09:10 PM [in reply to ernestoz](#)

"You "win" by staying there and providing security to the people until they are able and willing to provide their own security."

Unless the populace objects to our being there, in which case we're the enemy. Or one of them.

"That may take 20 years or more. "

Ouch! That's way beyond most US citizens' attention span.

"Unless the US is willing to make the commitment, then we should never go into any country, under any circumstances."

Amen. Well, maybe we could visit as tourists, if they like us. But you're right, not as an invading force.

The last war the US was truly committed to was WWII, in which most everybody became involved in some way. That was a real war, and the US military lost over 400,000 people.

Korea, Vietnam, and other "wars" of more recent times didn't reflect anywhere near the same level of commitment (for better or for worse), arguably because the risk to the US (or the benefit for US allies) wasn't as clear. In Korea our military lost 36,500 people, less than a tenth of our military's losses in WWII. The losses in Vietnam were actually a little higher than in Korea -- 58,000 in Vietnam. Not a full US commitment in either instance, but both those wars affected civilians more because conscription (the draft) was in force.

The only war in recent times that seems clearly reasonable was the Gulf War (to defend US ally Kuwait from Iraqi invasion), but it's often argued that it was really more like a show of force, since there was little enemy counter-force, and there was essentially no threat to the average US citizen. There were 300 US military deaths in the Gulf War.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_casu...

Like



BigBuck 11/15/2009 01:05 PM [in reply to ernestoz](#)

jzatz liked this

"The US" doesn't ever make the commitment you're talking about.

I can't recall a war referendum ever.

I can't even recall a declaration of war by Congress in my lifetime.

Politicians in power make the decision to go to war for political reasons, and the other politicians stand back for fear of being called un-American, or the like.

What's un-American is going to war without the procedures prescribed in the Constitution. But that's what our weak and cowardly politicians do, every time.

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John Finn, hero at Pearl Harbor, dies at 100



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