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Roadside attacks still bedevil U.S. forces in Afghanistan

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE GHAZNI, Afghanistan — Dismounting from their armored convoy on a desolate stretch of Afghanistan's most important highway, the elite U.S. Army route-clearance team knew what to expect. They'd been struck by roadside bombs there before, and they'd been shot at there before.

Minutes after Sgt. John A. Lyons and three other soldiers began to scour the roadside for the tiny silver command wires that trigger big explosions, insurgents hiding nearby opened fire, striking Lyons in the thigh. He threw his weapon over a mud wall and tried to scale it but couldn't; when members of his unit found him, he was lying on the ground, bleeding badly. He died hours later. He was 26.

The incident last Wednesday along Highway 1 in eastern Afghanistan offered a stark illustration of the ongoing threat of roadside attacks against U.S.-led coalition soldiers. NATO commanders say that as Afghan and coalition forces weaken the Taliban, insurgents are avoiding direct combat by increasing their use of roadside bombs that kill not just soldiers, but a growing number of civilians as well.

Insurgents' use of what the military calls improvised explosive devices is up 22 percent nationwide from a year ago, the Pentagon reported Friday. But coalition forces are finding and

deactivating more than half of the bombs before they explode — thanks largely to a surge in tips from Afghan civilians, the Pentagon said.

The threat has pushed route-clearance teams like that of Sgt. Lyons to the forefront of coalition efforts to secure key highways. It also helps explain why Ghazni has become one of the deadliest provinces for coalition soldiers in Afghanistan, with 19 fatalities this year — more than the previous two years combined, according to icasualties.org, which tracks military deaths.

The growing violence comes even as parts of Ghazni are expected to be included among areas where coalition forces will soon begin handing control of security over to Afghan forces. President Hamid Karzai is scheduled this week to announce the second phase of nationwide transition areas — which may include Ghazni's provincial capital, about 15 miles northeast of the spot where Lyons was killed.

"This is the No. 1 area in the country to get blown up," said Navy Cmdr. Tristan Rizzi, commander of Ghazni's U.S. provincial reconstruction team, made up of soldiers, diplomats and civilians who work on relief and development projects.

Several weeks ago, not far from the site of last Wednesday's attack, a 200-lb. roadside bomb sheared an armored, 20-ton U.S. military truck in half, killing three soldiers and tossing the truck's hulking gun turret more than 100 yards, Rizzi said. The standard, soft-bodied pickup trucks used by Afghan security forces don't stand a chance.

Increasingly, insurgents are using larger homemade explosives — 200 lbs. is no longer rare, soldiers said. That indicates to military officials that insurgent networks not only operate facilities capable of manufacturing bombs of that size, but also that they have the manpower and vehicles to move the explosives into position quickly.

Along 85 miles of Highway 1 stretching north to south between the provincial capital of Ghazni and Warrior, another base used by American soldiers, the four Army route-clearance teams stationed here are constantly busy. Once swept for explosives, a section of the road is labeled "green," meaning safe — but it can turn to yellow or red again within 48 hours.

"It's truly frustrating," Rizzi said. "It shows how much freedom of movement they (insurgents) have."

Over the past few months here, Lyons' 8th Engineer Battalion, 36th Engineer Brigade of Fort Hood, Tex., has found about 30 bombs, including 12 that exploded on them, soldiers said. Several weeks ago, they had taken small-arms fire in the same spot where they dismounted last Wednesday at about 9 a.m. on a cool, clear morning.

Lyons, of Seaside Park, N.J., was one of the first out of his truck and on foot when the shooting started, but it happened so quickly that they couldn't tell exactly where it was coming from. The unit's experienced gunners suspected a nearby village, but held their fire at first, because they didn't know if civilians were in the area.

Three soldiers including Lyons were hit. Lyons's voice came over the radio: "I've been shot. Get over here quick!" It was the last time most of them heard his voice.

The province is emerging as a key test of security a decade into the Afghan war. Ghazni lies between Kabul, the capital, and Kandahar, the Taliban's homeland — and west of the provinces that border Pakistan, where U.S. officials say that the Haqqani network, a Taliban-allied group, enjoys safe haven.

Ghazni contains the longest stretch of the circular Highway 1, a crucial route for trade and civilian traffic, which has bedeviled American forces nearly since the start of the conflict. The U.S. government spent \$300 million to repave the road nationwide — and since April Rizzi's team has spent \$1.8 million to repair craters, some bigger than Dumpsters, left by fresh explosions, and another \$3 million on equipment to block openings to drainage ditches where bombs could be placed.

Still, dozens of charred vehicles wrecked in previous blasts litter the highway. Among them are Afghan passenger buses that, when laden with massive cargoes on their roofs, often trigger the pressure-plate bombs that act like landmines and are intended for coalition trucks.

The graveyard of vehicles reminds soldiers of the importance of their mission — and its danger.

"If we find the bomb and blow it up, then we did our job," said Spc. Jerin Delgado, 31, a medic in Lyons' unit from Dallas. "But if we get hit and blown up, we still did our job."