

The Importance of Working Together at Bomb Scenes: Lessons Learned in Iraq

By ATF Special Agent/Certified Explosives Specialist
Sam Dunnivant

I recently returned from a three-month assignment in Iraq where I worked with both the Combined Explosives Exploitation Cell (CEXC) and the Weapons Intelligence Teams (WITs) there. While assigned to CEXC, I was a member of a multi-national post-blast investigation response team in Baghdad with the primary mission of responding to IED related incidents. The CEXC response teams include U.S. and foreign military personnel, ATF certified explosives specialists, ATF explosives enforcement officers and FBI special agent bomb technicians. CEXC's response teams are just part of the Unit that also includes specialists in fields such as explosives, electronics, chemical analysis, forensics and intelligence. (The media has dubbed CEXC "CSI Baghdad".) The WITs, like the CEXC response teams, are investigative units that are staffed by EOD technicians and other military personnel. The WITs are embedded with EOD Units and respond with them not only to post-blast scenes, but also to live roadside bombs, weapons caches and "bomb factories". During my assignment to a WIT at a forward operating base (FOB) South of Baghdad, I worked as an investigator responding with EOD technicians to many different types of callouts.

CEXC is experiencing an incredible amount of success in the technical and forensic exploitation of IED related evidence that is collected by its response teams and the WITs. The information developed from this evidence is critical to the counter IED efforts that are saving lives and to identifying insurgent bomb makers. Much of CEXC's success is attributed to the quality of the evidence being submitted, which, in large part, is due to the close working relationship between technicians and investigators. Technicians and investigators work together throughout all aspects of the investigations including: identifying critical IED components; collecting and preserving evidence; identifying and documenting insurgent tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs); and targeting individuals and cells involved in bomb making and bomb emplacement. Investigators working with technicians at pre-and post-blast scenes allow the technicians to concentrate on their critical job of identifying and either defusing or destroying IEDs, while investigators concentrate on interviewing witnesses/victims, collecting evidence and documenting the scene. Although it is made clear from the day you arrive that no piece of evidence is worth dying for, or for that matter even being injured for, technicians and investigators make every effort to identify and collect intact components in the best possible condition for submission to CEXC.

There is no doubt that in most situations in Iraq another set of eyes, ears, and hands is almost always welcome, but the level of cooperation I witnessed between technicians and investigators went beyond that. There was a strong bond between them that was more than camaraderie - A mutual respect for each other and a shared goal that was bigger than any differences they may have had.

When people in our line of work ask me about my experience in Iraq I tell them I feel like I've seen the future. Not just the future of the manufacture and use IEDs (which is invaluable), but the future of cooperation between the technical/tactical and investigative sides of bomb investigation. The extensive use of IEDs in Iraq has advanced by many years the process of dealing with and investigating these incidents, as well as the knowledge we gain from this experience. There are some aspects of dealing with IEDs in Iraq that, understandably, may not be discussed for some time. But, the knowledge of the success our military is experiencing in this area based on the cooperative efforts between technicians and investigators is something we can use to our advantage now.

I have the good fortune in Northwest Florida of working closely with bomb technicians from the State Fire Marshals Office in Pensacola, the Big Bend Bomb Squad in Tallahassee and the Bay County Sheriff's Office in Panama City. Even though I'm not a technician, I train and respond to incidents with them on a regular basis. We have proven time and time again the positive results that come from technicians and investigators working together throughout the entire response process. The best example of this being the successful prosecution of an individual who received a 45-year federal prison sentence after 29 active IEDs were found in a methamphetamine lab he was operating.

My experience in Iraq has only confirmed what I've experienced in Northwest Florida over the past five years and what ATF and the IABTI have advocated for many years: That a close working relationship between bomb technicians and bomb investigators benefits everyone except the bomb maker. The next time you have the opportunity, talk to an EOD technician or investigator who has worked for CEXC or one of the WITs in Iraq. Everyone will have their own opinion, but I'm sure the positive comments will far outweigh the negative ones.



A federal law enforcement officer for 17 years, Sam Dunnivant is currently an ATF special agent/certified explosives specialist in Panama City, Florida. He taught Post-Blast Investigative Techniques in Iraq in 2004, returning there in 2007 as a post-blast investigator for both the Combined Explosives Exploitation Cell and a Weapons Intelligence Team. He is also a member of ATF's National Response Team and the Northwest Florida Regional Bomb Squad.