

After the Blast: Learning to Find Clues

By Major Ian J. Townsend

The quiet little town of Bell Buckle, Tennessee, was first established as a railroad village nestled among the hills, farmland, and walking-horse country of Bedford County. Today, this cozy little town, with a population of less than 400, has become more recognizable across both the state and the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command (USACIDC)—commonly referred to as the “CID”—for more than the rail stop it once was. In addition to famous home cooking and southern hospitality, the town is known as the home of the Tennessee Fire Service and Codes Enforcement Academy, where for one week every spring, CID agents come together for the annual Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) Post Blast Investigative Techniques Course, which is hosted by the 1000th Military Police Battalion (CID) based at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

This year, the commander of the 1000th Military Police Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Bobby R. Atwell Jr. directed his staff to plan and coordinate the course and ensure that it was a quality training event. Special Agent Carl Dewyer (Retired) organized the instruction by making use of his extensive list of intra-agency contacts. Special Agent Certified Explosive Specialist (SACES) Michael Knight of the ATF, Nashville Field Division, led the instruction.

Twenty-two CID agents—all preparing to deploy—completed forty hours of practical instruction that focused on explosives, explosive effects, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and blasts. The valuable instruction also helped prepare agents for the investigation of potential postblast crime scenes within the continental United States. The instruction consisted primarily of briefings conducted by subject matter experts from law enforcement agencies across Tennessee. A case study demonstrating the effects of explosives was the capstone of the classroom instruction. At the completion of the course, a hands-on



Special agents view bomb components that remain after a blast.

practical exercise tested the students’ knowledge about postblast investigation.

More than twenty-six instructors helped ensure that students gained knowledge about explosives and blasts throughout the week. These included bomb technicians and certified explosive specialists from the ATF; Metropolitan Nashville Police Department, Nashville, Tennessee; Tennessee Highway Patrol; Columbia Police Department, Columbia, Tennessee; Chattanooga Police Department, Chattanooga, Tennessee; Transportation Security Administration; Tennessee State Fire Marshal, Bomb and Arson Investigation Section; and subject matter experts from the Tennessee Office of Homeland Security and the Brentwood Police Department, Brentwood, Tennessee.

The course began with an “Introduction to Explosives,” which was presented by Sergeant Robin Howell, commander of the Hazard Devices Unit, Columbia Police Department. The instruction consisted of an overview of explosives, their basic

components, and their effects. Preblast bomb composition was also addressed. Students learned what it takes to make a bomb; that knowledge should enhance their ability to analyze evidence and clues when conducting postblast investigations. Sergeant Howell provided key investigative tips and stressed that attention to detail during an investigation is important in determining the type of explosive that was used. This detailed information could be the key to solving a case.

Next, Special Agent Don Cogan of the Tennessee State Fire Marshal, Bomb and Arson Investigation Section, discussed clandestine laboratory investigations and blast injuries and deaths. He explained that bomb blasts must always be viewed as multi-dimensional events—not just as incidents where “something blew up.” Students were urged to think about the precursors to a bomb blast—specifically, about how the bomb might have been constructed. They were reminded that detail-oriented searches for evidence of key, commercial, bomb-making parts at postblast sites often result in clues that can help investigators and crime laboratories determine the origin of the bomb components. This information can then assist in the identification of perpetrators and accomplices. Every student had the opportunity to see, study, and hold commercially purchased bomb components. These original components were then placed side by side with identical components that had been through a blast. This allowed students to compare the two states to gain a better understanding of how components are transformed during a blast. They could see which parts retained their shapes and could, thus, be easily identified following a blast. They could also see which parts no longer resembled their original form and could be easily overlooked during an investigation. In conclusion, Special Agent Cogan pointed out that the integration of several minute details helps establish an overall picture of the event that transpired.

Mr. James Cotter of the Brentwood Police Department gave a very informative “Suicide Bomber” briefing, which was focused directly at those agents who were preparing to serve in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Mr. Tim Bernik, who works for the Tennessee Office of Homeland Security and is also a bomb appraisal officer at the Nashville International Airport, presented very graphic instruction on “Landmines and Booby Traps.” Lieutenant David Woosley, commander of the Chattanooga Police Department Bomb Squad, discussed IEDs and their blast effects.

Students learned the basic characteristics and some of the key differences in primary explosives commonly used in IEDs. This information should help agents in conducting postblast investigations by allowing them to more quickly determine the types of explosives involved. ATF Explosives Enforcement Officer Lee Conklin then described the capabilities and mission of his organization—a key force multiplier that CID agents work with daily in theater.

Once the theater-specific briefings were completed, a clear, concise case study was presented by SACES Steve Wiley from the ATF. The case study compared a high-explosive detonation to a low-explosive detonation that occurred two years later at the same location. This comparison educated the students on the differences between the two levels of explosions.

To graduate from the course, students were required to complete an investigation practical exercise that tested their ability to deal with one of three different vehicle-borne IED blast scenarios. Each of the scenarios consisted of reconstructions of blasts that SACES Knight and Mr. Cotter had taken directly from actual bombing events that occurred in Iraq during the previous year. Evaluations were based on the ability of the students to collect and analyze evidence and determine what happened in a wide variety of postblast scenarios.

The ATF Post Blast Investigative Techniques Course was an overall success because it allowed for the sharing of ideas among multiple agencies that work with the CID. Due to their attendance at the course, these CID agents are better prepared for deployment and will be better investigators for the rest of their careers.

If the training described in this article or the opportunity to investigate felony crime in the U.S. Army interests you, you can get more information about becoming a special agent by visiting your local CID office or going to http://www.cid.army.mil/join_CID.html.

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