



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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**Adam Ray**

**Michael Yon**

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**Kandahar, Afghanistan**

On Feb. 9<sup>th</sup>, in a field near a road, an Afghan soldier squatted to relieve himself. He picked the wrong spot. A bomb exploded, blowing off a leg, and he died. Captain John Weatherly, Commander of Charlie Company of the 4-23 Infantry at FOB Price in Helmand Province, mentioned that in passing as he described the series of events that led to the death of Specialist – now Sergeant – Adam Ray, a vigorous 23 year old, born in Tampa, Florida. The bomb the Afghan stumbled upon was near the IED that struck Adam.

Without the thousands of culverts underneath, the roads of Afghanistan would be flooded and washed away during the snow melts and rains. In safe countries, drivers pay as little attention to culverts as we would to telephone poles. As a practical matter they are invisible to us.

In the war zone that is Afghanistan, life and limb depend on noticing normally mundane things like culverts. They are a favorite hiding spot for the Taliban to plant bombs intended to kill Americans driving the roads. Hundreds, even thousands of pounds of explosives can be stuffed inside, launching our vehicles into the sky, flipping them over and over, sometimes killing all. And so, in some areas, soldiers on missions must stop dozens of times to check culverts for explosives. Since we do this every day in front of thousands of Afghans, they know our patterns. In addition to planting bombs in culverts, they plant mines and other bombs near culverts, to get men who stop to check.

The U.S. military has been taking inventory of the culverts, identifying their exact locations, and documenting them with photos and maps. The military has embarked on a program to place barriers on culverts over which our troops cross on any regular basis. The enemy tries to remove or circumvent the barriers, and so night and day we have SKTs (Small Kill Teams) who move from place to place watching culverts. The SKTs frequently call fire that kills men who come to place bombs. When more enemy comes to collect the bodies, we kill them, too. But the SKTs can't be everywhere all the time, and so this wily adversary lands hard blows every day.

The main route west from Kandahar is Highway 1, the jugular for ground transport in Afghanistan, which also connects to major cities like Kabul. Donor nations have invested hundreds of millions of dollars to construct and attempt to safeguard this crucial passageway.

Yet the enemy is always there, leaving convoys smoldering and bullet-riddled bodies slumped over steering wheels or crumpled on the road.

Between Kandahar and just east of FOB Tombstone most of the culverts have been blocked with obstacles such as concertina razor wire, yet ten remained open.

And so on Tuesday, 9 February 2010, Charlie Company from the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry of the 5/2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team from Fort Lewis, headed out to conduct “culvert denial.” The Soldiers know the risks of approaching the culverts, yet they do it anyway.

Staff Sergeant Christine Jones from the 4<sup>th</sup> Combat Camera Squadron was along on the mission. Company Commander Captain John Weatherly was away at a meeting when 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon arrived west of Maiwand, just off the south side of Highway 1, near the village of Yakhchal, a Taliban stronghold.

The unreleased combat photos show that the morning was clear and bright. Soldiers can be seen unwinding concertina wire at the mouth of one side of the culvert. Specialist Adam Ray walks across the road to the other side of the culvert, down in the drainage area, and a photo catches dust in the air. A flock of birds can be seen taking flight. The meta-data on the image indicates it was 9:30 AM. A white 4-door car sped away, over the culvert, and Sergeant Jones quickly snapped to get the plate. Subsequent investigations indicated the car was not involved. The soldiers’ discipline speaks for itself; nobody shot at it.

Adam Ray was among the three soldiers who had been wounded by the small explosion. Captain Weatherly got the radio call and headed over, as did Army medevac helicopters. Adam’s feet and legs were fine; the explosive was buried higher up, near the road at the side of the culvert. He had been hit in the neck. The other two soldiers had arm wounds that were not severe. Despite the danger of more bombs, the photos show soldiers and medics diving straight in to help. Adam was patched and put onto a litter, and soon an Army helicopter with a red cross landed in the dust. The wounded were loaded and flown to Camp Bastion where Adam Ray, the third of five children, beloved son of a minister and a devoted mother, a soccer player and a flirt, who tutored dyslexic kids and was known to ask less popular girls to dance at school events, died. He was 23 years old.

*Michael Yon is a former Green Beret who has been reporting from Iraq and Afghanistan since December 2004. No other reporter has spent as much time with combat troops in these two wars. Michael’s dispatches from the frontlines have earned him the reputation as the premier independent combat journalist of his generation.*

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