

Battlefield Forensics: DNA Labs in Iraq and Afghanistan

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The Joint Expeditionary Forensic Facilities (JEFF) labs are constantly adjusting to a dynamic operational environment that ranges from providing actionable intelligence to the military commanders on the ground to the anticipated future of training and mentoring of Afghan and Iraqi scientists. This presentation will focus on the history of these battlefield DNA labs, logistical challenges associated with standing up and sustaining this capability, examination methods used to process difficult and compromised evidence, and the support provided to the US intelligence agencies to fight terrorism.

The first forensic DNA lab was stood-up in Baghdad, Iraq in November 2006 despite doubts regarding the possibility of establishing a DNA capability in a battlefield environment. Since then, the value of this forensic capability has been well established and military commanders, to include General Odierno, have directed the addition of several more labs across Iraq and Afghanistan to support the expeditionary and time-sensitive needs of military operations. These JEFF laboratories operate in difficult and austere environments; process samples recovered from material or individuals associated with attacks against U.S. or coalition forces; and support a diverse cadre of military and site exploitation teams to include: Special Operations Task Forces, Weapons Intelligence Teams, and exploitation labs focused on the analysis of improvised explosive devices. The DNA experts must first be able to attain a secret clearance through the Department of Defense in order to be authorized to deploy and work in these labs. They are seasoned examiners with many years of experience working for government and private crime labs from all over the U.S and are armed with a variety of chemistries, tools, and techniques to obtain DNA profiles from the multitude of challenging items that they process routinely and expediently in support of the mission.