

# THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

## A lesson from Sgt. Sitton

January 08, 2013

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An Army Ranger from Largo who was serving in Afghanistan had written his U.S. representative, Republican Bill Young, to question the purpose of twice-a-day patrols that had his men "walking around aimlessly" while taking heavy casualties.

A few months later in August, the courageous staff Sgt. Matt Sitton was fatally wounded when a nearby soldier stepped on and triggered a buried homemade bomb.

Sitton's front-line critique of the fighting caused Young to reconsider the wisdom of the whole Afghanistan mission and, as the Tribune's Howard Altman has reported, to call for an earlier-than-planned withdrawal.

We believe Young is right, and now comes an eye-opening Army report on the incident that killed Sitton and a Texas soldier. Altman reports that Rangers in Sitton's unit told investigators that their Afghan allies were often high on drugs and unreliable fighting partners. When going on a dangerous patrol, it was safer to leave them behind.

Rangers called the native forces "untrained, undisciplined and most certainly unable to hold any terrain alone in Afghanistan."

This is a significant criticism of a mission whose whole point has become training the Afghanistan National Army to take over when it is left on its own next year.

Rep. Young, head of the defense subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, now says of Afghanistan, "I don't even know what the mission is."

Confusion and incompetence are not the military's official view. Officially, the Afghan forces are making progress and should be self-reliant sometime soon. We've been hearing such optimism for many years.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is in Washington this week to talk about the future and also to complain.

He has been accusing the United States of not respecting his nation's sovereignty and for injecting a "corrupting influence." He also wants more help protecting his country's borders and less internal meddling. And he also wants a good air force.

President Obama should ask him why Americans like Sitton are out in the field getting killed or maimed while the Afghans are back at the base getting stoned. He should ask why Karzai's army is so unreliable so many years into the fight.

Sitton was on his third combat tour. But he was only 15 when U.S. forces intervened to drive the Taliban from power. Many of our troops fighting and dying for Karzai's government were much younger — in elementary school when the war started.

How is it that they are ready to fight but the Afghans aren't?

Obama is right to nominate a clear-headed independent, former Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, as the new secretary of defense. Hagel, a Republican and a Vietnam veteran, has plenty of partisan detractors from both the left and right.

That's because he promises to be a pragmatic leader, not an ideological one.

The Cato Institute describes Hagel as a "decorated combat veteran who disdains promiscuous war-making."

Should he be confirmed, Hagel can be counted on to see the war through the eyes of Americans like Sutton who are fighting it, or trying to.

As Sitton put it in his letter, "I am all for getting on the ground and fighting for my country when I know there is a desired end state, and we have clear guidance of what needs to be done."

He put the issue as concisely as it can be put: What exactly needs to be done? Certainly not to walk around until someone steps on a mine.

Obama's choice to head the CIA is John Brennan, an expert in counterterrorism.

The selection of Hagel and Brennan could signal a new and more effective approach\_ attack terrorists wherever they show up and back away from the increasingly senseless counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.