

Royal Engineers, Bomb Disposal in 1948.

The information has been taken from documents held at the Royal Engineers Archives.

BD Situation in the UK.

Written on the 15 November 1948.

1. In accordance with instructions received in telcon (Stevens-Buchan) on 10 November herewith summary of the position of Bomb Disposal and Minefield Clearance (other than training minefields) in the UK as of 15 November 1948.
2. Progress can be best seen from tables attached (these were not in the folder).
3. The figures are not encouraging as not only has the number of outstanding bomb incidents again risen to 132 (which is higher than the figure 1 April after being as low as 111 at the beginning of August) but the removal rate has dropped. The causes of this apparent slowing up of work are considered to be as follows:-
 - (a) The repatriation by June of the majority of German POWs in Squadrons, the absorption of other Germans to make up to a strength about 40% of the original strength and their change in status from POWs to civilians.
 - (b) The release of many experienced BD Officers and the shortage of Officers in Squadrons.
 - (c) The increasing difficulty of many of the tasks which are being dealt with.
 - (d) The employment of units to a greater extent, on tasks other than was covered by Appendix A and C (not found in the file).
4. Some elaborations of these points may be desirable.
 - (a) The number of POWs employed was 1,200, the number authorised to be employed as civilians 500, which figure is at the moment reduced to 476 owing to the weeding out of undesirables. About half of this number were newcomers and had to learn the procedure. As civilians they work shorter hours to a time-table based on the avoidance of overtime pay, and apparently also not quite as well as they used to do. The reorganisation also undoubtedly caused a set back to progress, which is probably reflected in the low figures for July to September Quarter as compared with the second quarter and the first six weeks of the fourth quarter. A similar and more serious dislocation must be expected at the beginning of 1949 when over half will be going for a month's leave in Germany.
 - (b) From June it became impossible to keep Squadrons up to their establishment of 7 officers (excluding one Infantry Admin Officer). It was laid down that AG 7 would only attempt to keep 5 Engineer Officers, but occasionally numbers have dropped as low as three. As Squadrons have widely separated Detachments, this has caused considerable difficulty especially as an officer has to be present when any work is being done on a minefields and at all times when bombs are being immunised. More ever increasingly during the past month or so, Squadrons have been required to devote time to such activities as Education, Officers Tactical Training, Musketry etc. Not unnaturally both organisation and execution of work have tended to suffer on occasion. Unfortunately also officers new to Bomb Disposal cannot really fill the gap caused by the release of experienced BD Officers nor pull their weight until they have been on courses at SME and gained some experience.
 - (c) Apart from new incidents, the bombs still remaining of those originally on our books usually present special difficulty, because previously they were left either because

they were sufficiently far removed from habitations to be left pending while the war was in progress. Difficult cases are being coped with by the use of Sheet Piling (though we are not as yet fully experienced in its use) Dewatering Plant and Special Pumps, but take time; while incidents of the latter type also may take time not because their removal presents difficulty but because it is hard to locate them, owing the exact whereabouts of the hole of entry of the bomb no longer being known. Here we are hampered by lack of locators, one per Squadron only being available. Twenty Mine Locators are being converted to Bomb Locators at top priority be REME but they are not expected to be ready until 3 months' time.

Of new incidents, some are genuine bombs discovered for example when work starts on restoring some gutted buildings and can usually be dealt with quite easily, others suspected from some subsidence in the ground due to a fractured drainage pipe, decayed trees etc, are quickly discredited. Recently a third type has begun to form a greater proportion of new incidents, these are bombs brought to notice by Regional Authorities, which either have not previously been reported to the BD Organisation or which were abandoned during the War, but regarding which persons interested have not been satisfied. A case in point is a bomb adjacent to large petrol installations at Avonmouth. This was abandoned by a Naval BD Unit as being ungettable though in fact it now seems as though its removal will present no great difficulty. It is expected that quite a few more of such incidents will be brought to our notice all of which will tend to fall into the category of difficult. Home Office are however being asked to get Regional Offices to investigate and bring forward, if necessary, all such cases now so that a truer figure of the BD Commitments can be obtained. One can then hope for a steady decrease from this figure instead of one checked by intermittent resuscitation of such incidents.

It may be as well at this stage to explain the far higher figure for new incidents discredited in the case of London as compared with other Commands. This to a great extent is a matter of procedure with Regional Offices. In London, any reported incident which might turn out to be a bomb is recorded; elsewhere cases reported which only require an hour or twos work to prove unfounded, are not recorded as incidents.

(d) The types of work recently carried out by Units, which would not be recorded in Appendices A and C (not found in the file), in addition to minor tasks such as location of buried missing safes, the checking of bales of Rubber for hidden iron bands, and the reconnaissance and destruction of grenades etc, (vide my HQ/BD/M-4 dated 13-8-48) include resweeps of Minefields and clearance of areas said to be infested with SD2 bombs. Three particularly large areas of the latter exist; two are now being tackled. At 40% completion one has so far absorbed 9650 man hours, the other estimated by the unit as requiring 30 men for 6 months. In addition various Training Areas etc have been cleared, references to which made in my HQ/BD/B-5 dated 27-10-1948. Such tasks are outside the normal scope of BD employment as laid down in ACI 259/46.

(e)

Headquarters.
BD Units (UK) RE
78 Ashley Gardens,
London S W 1.

Lieut-Col RE
Commander BD Units (UK) RE

Headquarters
BD Unit (UK) RE
78 Ashley Gardens.
London.
S W 1.

Following was written on the 26 November 1948.
25 November 1948.

Following on from a letter 21 October 1948 which apparently arose out of my complaint to him that Northern Command were not doing much to clear agricultural land in the Autumn as they had agreed.

He pointed out that frequently little help is forthcoming from District and therefore his help may often be of assistance if you notify him that you are being held up. We are also able to procure things through the War Office, but the process is long as you know reference the hose.

Requirements must be thought out well in advance where a need can be foreseen and all sources explored, when an urgent requirement arises for something that could not have been foreseen. Here also 57 Gen and the possibilities of other Squadrons though you cannot expect other Sqns to be keen to hand over anything he can foresee a use.

Shortness of Officers and good NCOs are known. Continuing to press War Office and presume you are doing the same with records. I have suggested to Ratcliffe that he might assist with some pressure and I could tackle records myself if I have the details showing that you have been deficient of certain personal for a long time or have made several applications. The extension of National Service should help a bit.

As regards the Germans I should mention that in fact you have no powers of punishment in the shape of suspension as this is merely a measure to keep someone away from work while his case is being considered. Your same remarks would apply if they were British, but the threat of deportation should be a big deterrent to many who have no home to which return.

As regards detailed notes there is nothing much to comment on. But I am not clear on how many Coventry Climax Pumps, (or others in lieu) you received. It was intended you receive three to make up establishment and three more for special purposes. The latter being extra to establishment required special authority and, in the end, surplus Sulzer & Leyland Pumps were sent from 7 Sqn in lieu.

Following was written on the 26 November 1948.

From Ashley Gardens as the above.

Its is a follow-on letter from one they received on the 22 October, too clear up a couple of points.

There had been issues in obtaining equipment from Listers for forth coming work. HQ believed that Lister, (not sure if this was a person in supply) were not aware of BD intention to concentrate on bombs remaining on agricultural land in the Autumn, as Squadron change overs happened at the same time. However Lister appears not to have taken sufficient care to ensure that his equipment was in order. One problem was obtaining canvas hose, which took 6 weeks, (this indicates that the equipment could have been pumps?)

Fitters.

Shortage, we can only ask records for more, however there is a universal shortage. If reasonably proficient fitters should be able to carry out maintenance by following the pumps hand book. Ripon might possibly be able to give some instruction. There are also German Fitters.

Spares.

Is there a special difficulty? Squadrons should be able to get parts from local sources.

Officers.

A Difficult question, I am constantly worrying E3 and AG7 on the matter. If having to run a number of detachments Squadrons struggle with the reduced number of Officers. If the question of BD Sqns arises with the War Office your support in requesting more officers would be welcome.

Travelling time.

Five hours travelling is quite ludicrous and must be a new development, wasn't happening when I last visited. Ant travel over 2 ½ hours serious consideration should be given to forming another detachment.

Clerks.

4 ought not to be short of their establishment. However they have German clerks who do the majority of work in connections with the Germans.

Conferences.

Possibility of this for Squadron Commanders have been considered, but there are difficulties. I do not think however Squadrons would be anxious to pass on any store for which it could foresee a use itself. If Squadrons have special deficiencies however, notify us, we do tackle other Squadrons as a possible source of supply.

Extractor Hammer & Transport.

Reding the document unsure what the issues were but had been ongoing for some months.

Fire Tender.

Ony two had been available. More than two applications had been made for them. 4 Sqn were not lucky. There is no question of provision failure.

Timber.

Some letter had been sent out previously, no details given.

Pumps

Lister has omitted to mention that in response to his letter of 21 September we explained that spares can be obtained from local sources. Although it is desirable to obtain through WD Services if possible.

Major D N Ratcliffe
Chieh Engineers Office
Fishergate House

Fishergate
Yorks