

The Italian Connection.

Documents held at the Royal Engineers Museum Archives for 1948 showed that with the reduction of BD Units, numbers of BD Officers and SNCO leaving, German POW numbers employed being reduced by over half was affecting the work load. See the post from the 26 March 2026.

Also in the files two letters were found discussing the possibility of employing Italians to come and work in BD in the UK.

Address at the top of the letter is

Lt Col J C Smuts OBE
c/o National Provincial Bank,
156 Fleet St,
London E C 4.

It is dated 4 April and there is a stamp block on the page Director Bomb Disposal 6 April 1948. At the bottom of the letter it is signed J C Smuts. So when reading you will see that it appears the Director of BD had contacted Lt Col Smuts about Italian recruitment and this is his reply.

Dear Sir,

Further to your letter of 9 Feb, and to my telephone conversation with Maj How-White. I have at last got the information you wanted from Italy. I am sorry that I have been so long in doing so; but the Society in Italy had dispersed its employees, and has had to make a detailed check with them as to availability ect before replying to me.

The answers to your questions are as follows:

- (a) The Society can provide up to 10 teams of bomb-lifters. Each team will consist of 6 to 8 men. (If you require it the size of the teams can be increased, and so can the number of teams).
- (b) All members of the teams are experienced in lifting British and American unexploded bombs in Italy.
- (c) The teams consist of two classes of men. Those whose job to remove the sol from around the bombs (I gather this requires a certain technique), and those who are able to deal with the bomb mechanism, either by neutralising them or by blowing.

I hope this gives you the information that you want.

Now as to arrangements. I think the sooner I get my friend and his Society into direct contact with you the better (that is, of course if you think that they likely be of service to you.). But I would suggest that you are most likely to start ad idem, if you will let me know roughly what are your proposals and requirements. I Could communicate this to the Society and explain to them any points which they might misunderstand. After that they could write to you direct about a definite agreement and as to details. Would you, therefore, please let me know:

- (a) Whether the men and their organisation are what you want.
- (b) Roughly for how long would you want them.

- (c) What type of agreement you would think of coming to with the Society. (i.e Roughly the method and amount of payment; transport problems; housing; tools; insurance; etc)

If you will let me know your views on these matters, I will find out for you whether your proposals are sufficiently acceptable to the Society to make the matter worth pursuing into details, and will then put the Society into direct touch with you. I would, of course, make it abundantly clear to the Society that anything you say at this stage is not to be taken as a firm offer unless you say so.

Thank you once again for your assistance in this matter. I hope that something comes of it. I can assure you that the Society are very anxious to get this work, and I think you will find them satisfactory to deal with.

Yours faithfully,
J C Smuts

From Lt Col J C Smuts dated 8 April 1948.

It appears to be the reply from the Director of Bomb Disposal.

Thank you for your letter dated 4 April regarding the Italian Bomb Disposal Organisation.

Proposals for their employment have now been submitted to Engineer in Chief's Branch, The War Office. I cannot of course say whether the suggestion for employment of Italians is likely to be accepted and I fear inevitably there will be considerable delay while the matter is reviewed by the Foreign Office, the Treasury and other Depts, of State concerned. I think however that it would be worthwhile your communicating with the Society giving general details of the manner in which it is considered that they could be employed to see if this is acceptable and, in the meantime, it is hoped that some definite proposals will have been evolved.

It must be stressed that what follows is entirely unofficial, but if their employment is approved it is considered likely to be somewhat on the following basis;

1. I do not think the Society would be accepted as an independent organisation but could provide Detachments for Bomb Disposal Squadrons. These detachments would probably be between 80 to 120 men per Squadron, which also contain 50 British Officers and ORs.

The Squadron would be divided into two or more Troops working in the same Civil Region and each Troop would be split into smaller parties working on Bombs near Troop HQ.

2. For every 10 to 20 men there would probably have to be one Sub Overseer (or NCO) and one Overseer (or Officer) for every party of 80 to 100 (or possibly one Officer for each Troop) and it would be desirable if these were English speaking. If more than one Squadron were formed one Superior Officer might also be required.

For each Squadron four or five men would also have to be taken on as Cooks and possibly a few men as Cooks assistants, orderlies etc. Alternatively these duties may be undertaken by all men in rotation.

3. Men after preliminary instruction in the use of equipment would be employed on excavating and framing of shafts and on locating unexploded bombs. Possibly also if certain of the men having technical knowledge, they might be employed on machinery such as Compressors, Pumps and Piledrivers. They would also have to remove bomb cases after the contents have been removed or after the bombs have been rendered inert by removal of the fuzes. They would NOT be required to deal with the fuzes, which would be done by British personnel in the Squadrons. The risks therefore from explosion of a bomb would be negligible.
4. Conditions of Employment as regards Insurance etc, will either be the same as British Workmen or alternatively as a British Soldier; and it will probably be most convenient for men to be enlisted on a short-term basis and come under conditions of military service similar to those under which Units consisting of European personal have been formed to clear Battle Training Areas etc. Men would be housed in Barrack Rooms provided with rations. All tools, equipment and transport would be provided by the Squadrons though it might be necessary for some of the party to be engaged as MY Drivers.

No other pages were found in the file relating to this.