

Bomb Disposal Situation in 1949. Historical Notes.

The information comes from documents held in the Royal Engineer Museum Archives.

By 1949 it had been decided that Bomb Disposal need to be re-organised to fulfil its role in peace time.

Areas covered.

- a. Squadrons on strength now and future requirements.
- b. Considerations that would affect the future.
- c. Manpower requirements and availability.
- d. Use of Ex German POWs and organisation required.
- e. Plant availability and a Plant Squadron.
- f. Base and working locations for Units.

Information taken from documents held at the Royal Engineers Museum Archives.

The transcribed documents below will give you the wider details on subject matters mentioned in the overview.

Future re-organisation of BD Units

Letter Reference HQ/BD/B-5.

Dated 25 April 1949.

1. My HQ/BD/B-5 dated 13 Apr 49 forecast in effect that ten Squadrons years would be required to complete the removal of UXBs. Assuming this to be correct we have to consider what organisation will be best suited to complete the work. The following considerations affect the problem.
 - (a) It can be assumed that new incidents will continue to be reported though with decreasing frequency until the final stage is reached.
 - (b) It is certain that Beach Mines etc will be found for some time particularly on the East Coast and it is also highly probable that the occasional bomb will continue to turn up during dredging operations in pots or building restoration, particularly in the industrial areas.
 - (c) Naturally the fewer UXBs that remain and the quicker those now left are removed, the less risk there is of a bomb accidentally exploding.
2. From this one may conclude.
 - (a) That although one may try to clear up one area finally before moving to another new incidents are liable to be reported, after one has left an area which is supposed to be completed. Ultimately therefore when manpower considerations or the reduction in total effort required causes the BD strength to be brought down to say one Squadron, the Unit doing the work will probably have to be split up into small detachments all over the country and capable of moving quickly from place to place.
 - (b) That though from the point of view of control, it might be preferable to concentrate all effort in one part of the country at a time, it would perhaps be inadvisable to have no one available in other parts of the country in view of the dislocation caused if there is no one to deal with incidents referred to in para 1 b. In recent months there have been one or two cases of bombs being brought up in dredges in Merseyside one in an opencast coalfield in Northumberland and several during building operations, reservoirs cleaning etc. In such cases civilian workers usually down tools until the bomb is removed. To a less degree but more frequently assistance is likely to be required for dealing with Beach Mines etc.
 - (c) Arising from 1 c, that from the point of view of safety it would be preferable to employ a large force for a short time rather than a small force for a long time.
3. The immediate factors involved are:-

- (a) The number of Officers available are insufficient for the number of Squadrons now existing and will tend to decrease as time goes on and some get released. In any case some reduction is called for in view of the overall shortage of RE Officers.
- (b) Manpower considerations make it desirable to reduce British personnel as soon as possible, but as many Germans as required will probably be available.
4. It will therefore be necessary to change the organisation now, and new organisations being such as to permit, without dislocation of the system, further reductions which may if necessary be made as the task reduces. An organisation for the final stages must also be planned.
5. For the immediate future on the basis of 467 British Personnel up to 640 German ex POW and with the limiting factor of say 31 officers all told in Bomb Disposal including SME (which represents a decrease of present establishment of 28) the following alternatives are suggested:-
 - (a) Five Squadrons as under present arrangements, one in each Command (except Scotland) and London District.
 - (b) Five Squadrons organised as at present but controlled directly by War Office through BD Units. Not necessarily allocated one per Command.
 - (c) Three Squadrons plus one BD Plat Squadron as set out in Appendix A (*not in the file*)
 - (d) As c but modified as in Appendix A.
6. The advantage of 5 a and 5 b are that no revision of Sqn Establishments will be required. Since however it is likely more frequently to become desirable for detachments from one Squadron work in another Command Area, it is suggested that the stage has been reached where direct control becomes desirable. Arrangement 5 b as opposed to 5 a also makes it easier to retain better Squadrons and disband the worst and should also reduce the tendency for Squadrons to be employed on work other than specified in ACI 258/46.
7. Alternatives 5 c and 5 d, though they have the disadvantage that they involve the authorisation of new Establishments, are considered preferable to 5 e from the point of view of controlling the work as only three Squadron Commanders will have to be dealt with concerning work progress. There should always be a saving in respect of the number of persons purely administratively employed.
 Both 5 c and 5 d envisage an organisation of HQ BD Units, three BD Squadrons
 The possibility was considered of calling the whole ORGANISATION A bd Regiment and having a staff of about 20 at Regt HQ which would deal with all administration. It is thought however that it would be better for Squadrons to carry out their own administration and the staff recommended for HQ BD Units is therefore as at present with the exception that there would be three Captains in place of the two (including one from E in C pool) that exist at present. One of the Captains would deal with Plant and Stores; two others are described as Field Engineers; but one will also be largely occupied in preparing three BD Manuals to be published this year. Field Engineers will have to visit work in progress advise Squadron Commanders and prepare plans for work. They must therefore be experienced and require authority of the rank of Captain.
8. The difference between the Squadrons shown in Appendices A and B (*not in the file*) is that in the former there are two identical composite Troops of British and Germans while in the latter one troop is entirely British as per present establishment while the other contains a large number of both British and Germans. The Troop (POW) IN Appendices A, is identical with the British Troop in Appendices B with the addition of ten NCOs to supervise the 60 Germans, who will be split up into small working parties. In either case there fore existing Troops from I Sqn can be transferred en bloc to form four of the new Troops required.
 The advantages of the arrangement in Appendices A are that there are two identical Troops and personal can be transferred to the other as when desired. The advantages of Appendices B is that one Troop in each Squadron is freed from the administrative difficulty of having to accommodate and feed Germans as well as British, and will be better able to work in areas where the accommodation of Germans in at present is found so difficult. In all cases Troops will mostly be away from their Squadrons

on detachment and will themselves have several detachments, hence the necessity for more than one officer per Troop. Sqn HQ while administrating the Troops will also work all incidents in the locality of HQ. Any further reduction in Establishment can be carried out easily by doing away with one of the Troops.

9. The effect of these proposals on officer strength is that in place of the total 59 RE Officers on Establishment and 40 actual strength, there will be 31 including two officers at SME. There will also be 9 Surplus WOs who have had a short course at the SME who will be capable of assisting on the work though not with dealing with bombs.
10. The inclusion of a BD Plant Squadron has been considered necessary as a result of our present experience of finding plant lying idle with one Sqn when urgently required by another. The plant Sqn would hold the special equipment for which 2 Sqn are now authorised and in addition to their Establishment, the de-watering sets and the well boring rigs and also the piling equipment and cranes. The OC Plant Sqn would be responsible for seeing that full use was made of the equipment and be able to advise HQ BD Units when it came to a question of priorities. He would be responsible for the maintenance of the plant, and officers of the unit would visit work in progress. The dewatering and well boring equipment while with BD Sqns would be operated by the specially trained men belonging to Plant Sqn. It is proposed that the Plant Squadron should be stationed alongside the Sqn HQ responsible for London.
11. The reorganisation is carried out as under Appendices A or B it was proposed initially to have the following distribution.

1 Sqn HQ in London with one Troop in East Anglia and one South of Thames.

2 Sqn HQ at Winchester with one Troop at Wareham, one in Northern Command.

3 Sqn HQ at Bristol with one Troop in Plymouth one in Western Command.

Plant Sqn together with HQ 1 Sqn.

The primary function of detached troops especially the small British Troops would be to carry out location thereby either disproving the existence of the bomb or obtaining its exact position so that proper planning could be carried out of the work and equipment required for its removal.

Re-organisation of BD Duties.

Letter Reference HQ/BD/B-3

Dated 10 June 1949.

1. Reference conversation Major Hutchinson – Lt Col Maclagan, in connection with our HQ/BD/B-5 dated 25-4-49, addressed to E1.
Attached herewith are final revised suggestions for Establishments.

Appendix A	Establishment for HQ BD Units
Appendix B	Establishment for a Sqn HQ
Appendix C	Establishment for the British Troop of a Sqn
Appendix D	Establishment for the Troop with German Workers, referred to as BD Tp (Alien Civilian Element)
Appendix E	Establishment for BD Plant Squadron
Appendix F	Details of Transport required for all four Units.

None of these Appendix were in the file.

Squadron Headquarters.

2. It will be noted that each of the three similar Squadrons, have as a HQ more or less the same strength and composition as the existing Squadrons. The HQ will take on the same work as Squadrons now, but have in addition the responsibility of looking after the work done by the two troops. The establishment therefore apart from the exceptions noted below is much the same as that for a Bomb Disposal Squadron (POW) (v/1525/3). Explanations of differences are as follows :-

(a). Officers.

Necessarily reduced owing to the shortage of officers. It may be noted also that in point of fact where shown as Subaltern – may be WO the vacancies will in fact be filled by a surplus WO who have been trained in Bomb Disposal. This applies also to the similar remarks in the establishments Troop (ACE).

(b). Sergeants.

Two more required which is one more than that shown in the proposed Establishment for a BD Squadron RE under your 79/Mob/9303. The fifth Sgt is considered necessary for assisting the SQMS visiting the Troops and all various attachments in connection with the provision and replacement of Clothing and Equipment, taking over of Living Accommodation etc, since the Troops themselves will not be accounting Units. The Sgt for MT becomes more necessary in view of the fewer officers available to act as full-time MTOs.

(c) Clerks.

Two additional clerks are required to deal with the correspondence with the two Troops and maintain proper records of all work pertaining to the whole Squadron.

(d) Engine Fitter and Fitters.

An increase of two is allowed for in view of:-

- (i) The increased responsibilities of the Sqn.
- (ii) The greater dispersion of incidents.
- (iii) The poor condition of plant, particular pumps, with which the Sqns are now equipped.

(e) Carpenters and Bricklayers.

Two of each have been allowed. This is in conformity with your 79/MOB/9303 which introduces these trades as a requirement for a BD Squadron RE.

3. The BD Troop ACE is also equivalent in working capacity to the existing BD Squadron and its Establishment therefore is on much the same lines as that of a Squadron HQ. As Pay, Clothing etc however are to be dealt with by Sqn HQ which will also tackle more of the maintenance of plant, the Troop can function with fewer officers, clerks, fitters and electricians and without a Military Mechanist. A Sergeant can be made responsible for all Q problems but a WO II is required for the same duties as the SSM at Squadron HQ.
4. The BD Troop British differs somewhat in function and organisation from that of the BD Platoon RE under the somewhat outdated establishment III/20B/3. This was intended to enable a Troop to carry out three or possibly four digging jobs in one area. The proposed Troop though able also to work one or two incidents, is intended mainly to carry out the reconnaissance and location of all incidents in the Region; so that when the exact location of various bombs has been determined, the Squadron Commander can plan the best method of tackling the job employing any of the equipment or men at his disposal. Five or more locators will be available for the Troop so that probably five small locating detachments will be found plus one or two digging parties. The establishment therefore is rather greater than the existing establishment with a fitter and a Corporal for each locating detachment and

the addition of a draughtsman topographical to prepare site plans for each incident and plot locator readings.

5. BD Plant Squadron British on further consideration it is thought that initially the scope of BD Plant Squadron may be extended beyond what had previously been suggested. 10 Squadron which is to become Plant Squadron is at present engaged in a big task of searching for SD 2s in large rhododendron filled wood in Norfolk involving the employment of a considerable number of men and an Armoured Dozer. It is also due to employ an Armoured Dozer in a re-search of a large beach minefield at Hythe, and remove pipe-mines at Tangmere Airfield. It is felt therefore that as there are more Germans available and as this Squadron knows the details of the work involved, that in addition to its function of maintaining and allocating all plant it will also carry out work on bomb and mine clearance, particularly unusual jobs such as the above where special plant is required. The establishment, therefore has been increased from what its originally proposed by addition of a number of Germans and a few British personnel and is now comparable with that of an existing Squadron with variations in respect of special tradesmen for the Well-Boring Rigs and DE-Watering Plant (formerly authorised as additional to 2 Sqn). In addition nine Operators Excavator are required for working the cranes, Electricians and Welders are required for Plant maintenance, while Carpenters and Bricklayers are excluded. Drivers Class 1 are required for heavy transport, and there are two more Fitters in view of the maintenance required, and one less Engine Fitters, as less work on locating will be carried out than with the ordinary Squadron.
6. HQ BD Units has been increased by the addition of two Captains and one Sapper Clerk. This increase is necessary in view of the fact that this HQ will now take over from Chief Engineer the responsibility for the execution of the work. The rank of Captain is necessary in order to find an officer with sufficient experience to report and advise on work in progress. An officer will actually be engaged full time in writing three new manuals on Bomb Disposal, which we are required to produce.
7. G1098 Requirement of Arms; Ammunition etc will be on per capita basis , but as far as equipment is concerned it will suffice if:-
 - (a) Squadron HQ, Troops (ACE) and the Plant Squadron all have the same G1098 as the existing Sqns, namely 3499/2 FOR A bd Company plus additions recommended in our HQ/BD/E-8 Dated 31-5-48.
 - (b) Troops (British) has the same G1098 as the existing Troops in 1 Squadron (104/1)
BD Sqns (POW) AND 1 bd Sqn RE have both been functioning with approximately the same G1098 though this has not been quite satisfactory for POW Sqns since it often omitted to take into account the fact that these Squadrons have 100 or so Germans to feed and work. They can however function and the effect therefore is that we now require a G1098 scale for 7 Squadrons and 4 Troops.
8. Transport. Scales of Transport required are set out in ANNEX F (*wasn't in the file*). A comparison of total authorisations hitherto and as now required is set out in Appendix K (*not in the file*). There is a decrease of 16 Light Utilities as against an increase of 3 Heavy Utilities and 4 Cars 12 – 14 hp. The latter are required for Squadron Commanders who will have very long distances to cover when inspecting works in large areas in which they are operating, and require to be able to cover the ground quickly. Other vehicles are limited to 30 mph. A few additional lorries are required, again owing to the fact that incidents tend to be further from camp and more dispersed. The electrical welding trailer type F also is required. The remaining increases have been authorised hitherto as surplus to Establishment, but this should now be regulated by their inclusion in the WEs.
9. Plant Appendix J (*not in the file*) shows the plant required to be maintained by the Plant Squadron. Nearly all this plant is now being held by Squadrons on loan from Commands, but even so work is being held up through lack of plant particularly cranes. It is questionable however whether under the new organisation it will be possible to obtain these items on loan from Command.
10. Manpower a comparison of manpower under the new and existing organisations is given in Appendices G and H (*not in the file*). There is an increase of 8 WOs and Sergeants and 13 OR as against a decrease of 29 officers. Excluding Admin Officers (Infantry) the total Sapper strength will be 469 which is seven

less than the ceiling laid down. In point of fact it is well below the present actual strength as all Squadrons have temporarily a number of surplus British personnel.