

Historical notes on Bomb Disposal

Royal Engineers 1959 to 1968.

The following information has come from a document held in the Royal Engineers Museum Archives.

The following document presents the key points of Bomb Disposal through the period.

The main points covered are:-

1. Post War Run down of Units.
2. Structure and Unit designations.
3. Battle Area Clearance and Minefield Clearance.
4. Ukrainian Civilian Clearance Operators.
5. 5 Army BD School moving to Chattenden.
6. Honours and Awards.
7. Work on Betio, Penang.

Organisation.

- 1 The run down of the wartime and early post-war RE Bomb Disposal force continued year by year until by the late fifties it consisted of HQ BD Unit (UK) and two operational troops. HQ BD Unit (UK) together with the Army BD School and HQ BD (AER) Cadre, which controlled Nos 137, 142 and 144 AER BD Regiments, was based on Broadbridge Heath, Horsham, Sussex.
- 2 During the period 1957-1958, HQ BD Unit (UK) was commanded by Lt Colonel H H S Barker RE. Subsequent commanding officers are listed in ANNEX A.
- 3 At this particular time, no 1 (Minefield) Troop was located at MUNDESLEY, Near CROMER, NORFOLK, and had the responsibility for clearing the wartime minefields at MUNDESLEY, TRIMINGHAM, and SIDESTRAND. No 2 BD Troop was located at FORT WIDELY, near Portsmouth and dealt with bomb incidents throughout the UK. A small detachment was based at WHETSTONE particularly for work in London area. This Troop was transferred to Horsham in the very early sixties.
- 4 In addition to the operational troops, support was provided from HORSHAM, and this included the expertise of a Field Engineer of Major rank who dealt with the more complicated and tricky bomb situations. Perhaps the most celebrated of these was Major Bill Hartley MBE GM who filled the post until 1960.
- 5 Towards the end of 1962, HQ BD Unit (UK) assumed responsibility for Battle Area Clearance (BAC) and inherited part of the organisation and some of the manpower, mainly made up of Ukrainians, previously controlled by HQ BACU (UK), The Fort, PEACEHAVEN, SUSSEX. This unit was then renamed 3 BAC Troop and consisted of 1 Officer (Capt B J Knibbs) 1 Sgt Major, 3 S/Sgts, 3 Cpls and 113 civilians (Ukrainians).
- 6 Sometime in 1963, it was circulated that the keeping of a whole troop specifically used on the NORFOLK minefields was no longer justified, especially as more ? ? by that time, being found on other popular holiday beaches; luckily, ? ? ? were made after the Equinoctial gales outside the holiday season. In any event, only one Section of 1 Troop was from then on deployed on mine clearance duties and the remainder were allotted to more conventional duties. Generally speaking, 1 Troop dealt with all incidents north of a line from the THAMES to the BRISTOL CHANNEL, and 2 Troop with the incidents south of the line.
- 7 During 1965, HQ BD Unit (UK) undertook some further organisational changes. A BD Squadron, whose first commander was Major G Fletcher, was formed at Horsham to control two operational BD Troops, and the post of Field Engineer was dispensed with.
- 8 In July/August 1966, HQ BD Unit (UK) AND THE Joint Services BD School (previously known as Army BD School) moved to Lodge Hill Camp, Chattenden, Rochester, Kent. Historical notes on JSBD School,

which was administered by HQ BS Unit (UK) are attached as ANNEX B. At this time, the Royal Engineers were responsible for three main tasks in the UK. These were.

- a. To deal with any remaining anti-invasion B Type C (beach mines, anti-tank mines, airfield pipe mines outside RN and RAF property or on German aircraft.
 - b. To clear remaining anti-invasion B Type C (beach mines), anti-tank mines, airfield pipe mines, and bridge charges.
 - c. To methodically clear redundant Army ranges and training areas, which were to be or likely to be handed back for civilian use.
- 9 The BD Organisation for covering these tasks is outlined below. Briefly, the work was undertaken by a BD Sqn (in the mid sixties this was christened no 49), having two composite troops to respectively cover a northern and southern area. Some sections were firmly based and others “enjoyed” a very mobile form of existence. The manpower was of mixed military and civilian nature and each section or bomb squad was commanded by a Sgt with a Cpl as second in command. One of them was always present on the job with a vehicle and full first-aid equipment. The detailed organisation was as follows.

Headquarters BD Unit (UK) RE (Lieutenant Colonel). Mid 1960s.

BD Squadron (Later 49)
OC was a Major

Electrical and Mechanical Troop.

Joint Services BD School.
(Rotating Lt Comd, Major or Sqn
Ldr).

1 Troop Felixstowe. Captain OC.

1 Section Scarborough (BAC) Local Labour.

2 Section Felixstowe (BAC) Ukrainians.

3 Troop (Mine and Bomb) Mundesley, Local Labour.

2 Troop Lodge Hill. Captain OC.

4 Section (Bomb) Military 2 Squads.

5 Section (Bomb) 2 Squads.

6 Section South Downs (BAC) Ukrainians.

10. An essential part of the BD Sqn was the central “bomb office” where all the bomb, mine and battle area clearance records were compiled and maintained. Without these records and particularly the historical component it would have been well nigh impossible to tackle the BD task in hand with any confidence or guarantee of ultimate success.

11. The OC BD Sqn, as always, spent much of his time corresponding with Local Authorities and Forestry organisation all clamouring for attention. With his relatively meagre resources of manpower and equipment, he could do little more than establish priorities appropriate to particular situations which did not always satisfy his many “customers” who all wanted top priority for their on particular projects.

12. The Electrical and Mechanical Troop handled the provision and servicing of all heavy equipment such as vehicles, pumps, boring rigs etc and supported both the BD Sqn and JSND School. As always much depended on the reliability and durability of the specialist BD equipment in use.

13. AER Regiments. On April 1967, during the reorganisation of the Reserve Army, all BD AER Regiments were disbanded. This included Nos 137, 142 and 144 Regiments and two TA Independent Squadrons, namely 579 and 583 which had in some way remained intact since the days when the TA transferred to the AER. These two were located at CHATHAM and DOVER respectively. No 137 AER Regiment had been in existence since 1 October 1950, no 142 since 1953 and no 144 since 1 Aug 1955.

14. RE BD (V). No 590 Specialist Team RE (BD) (V) was formed at ROCHESTER, KENT on 1 April 1967 and was quartered in FORT CLARENCE. HQ BD UNIT RE was responsible for training this unit.

15. Title HQ BD Unit (UK). During 1966 it was suggested, and by Apr 67 agreed, that the letters (UK) should be deleted from the unit title, and some increase should be made to the unit's military manpower to enable it to deploy small squads on long detachment overseas. Support would be provided from field units in the theatre involved.

16. NATO Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Interservice Working Part (EODWP).

a. The NATO EODWP was set up in 1966 by the Military Agency for Standardisation (MAS) and sponsored by the Army Board to further standardisation in the field of EOD (BD) operations. It was to consist of representatives of each NATO country, command, and agency which agreed to participate; some 13 countries did.

b. The Chairman was to be provided by the UK (CO HQ BD Unit RE), and the first during 1966 was Lt Colonel I T C Wilson MBE MC RE.

c. The first three meetings took place in London during 1966/67 and the fourth in Brussels in 1968.

d. The term to replace BD in the UK was introduced by a DCI.GEN in Jan 1969.

e. In Oct 66, the Army Board (MAS) instituted a study to determine whether it was desirable to establish a NATO Training Centre and NATO EOD TECHNICAL INFORMATION CENTRE (EODTIC).

f. In Nov 67, the EODWP recommended that such Centres should be established and that the UK should be invited to be custodians of these projects. In early 1968, the UK agreed in principle to training being done at the JSBS at LODGE HILL CAMP and a EODTIC to be set up at the same location under HQ E – in – C sponsorship.

During the period 1959 – 1969 a number of decorations were awarded to RE personnel involved in bomb, mine and battle area clearance operations. These are listed at ANNEX C, and are a reflection of the dedication and skill required in the specialist field of bomb disposal. The cost of success can sometimes be high in terms of human life, and in this context one serious and fatal accident occurred in 1962 during the lifting of airfield anti-invasion pipe-mines (see ANNEX G, para 9). Nevertheless, this was the first and only fatal accident since 1953, and the only one during the period 1959 – 1968.

18. The details of the work done during the period under review under the headings of BATTLE AREA CLEARANCE, COASTAL MINEFIELD CLEARANCE and SUPPLEMENTARY BOMB DISPOSAL TASKS are outlined in ANNEXES D, E, F and G respectively.

ANNEX A.

Commanding Officers.

Bomb Disposal Unit RE

1957 to 1969.

Lt Col H S Barker RE	1957 -59
Lt Col J H Clark MC RE	1959 -62
Lt Col C A A Crouch RE	1962 - 64

Lt Col A G Townsend - Rose	1964 - 67
Lt Col I T C Wilson MBE MC RE	1967 - 69

ANNEX B.

Officers Commanding Joint Services BD School.

Major N C Young MBE RE	Jan 1959 – Jul 59
Major D W Townsend RE	1959 to 61
Sqn Ldr J A Reed MBE RAF	1961 - 64
Major GM Davies RE	1964 - 66
Lt Cdr S R Honour MBE	1966 - 68
Sqn Ldr F J Durrant MBE RAF	1968 -

ANNEX C.

Honours and Awards

1959 – 1969.

WO 2	G J	BIBBY MM	MBE	Jan 1959
Major	A B	Hartley MBE	GM	Mar 1960
Lt Col	B S T	Archer GC ERD	OBE	Jun 1961
Sgt	H E	Cooke	BEM	Jan 1962
Mr	J	Leonhardt	BEM	Jun 1963
S/Sgt	I R	Hillier	BEM	Jun 1965
Major	H P	Qualtrough MBE	GM	Jan 1967
Sgt	H E	Cooke	GM	Jan 1967
Mr	A T	Glew	BEM	Jun 1967
Major	M J V	Hoskins	GM	Jun 1969
S/Sgt	J C V	Wood	BEM	Jun 1969
Sgt	G	Duncan	BEM	Jun 1969

ANNEX D.

Battle Area Clearance (BAC)

1953 – 1968.

Period	Acreage Searched	UXO Recovered	Parts UXO Recovered
Jan 1953 to Dec 61	22816	59,141	-
1962	1188	16,890	-
1963	1299	7,270	5,054
1964	1157	11,569	15,218
1965	1794	5,253	7,685
1966	1600	16, 351	7,812
1967	2622	8,699	899
1968	2272	10,684	1,000

ANNEX E.

Battle Area Clearance.

Most of this ANNEX is missing.

All we have is

Whilst a Section of 2 BD Troop , under Sgt T Sawyer was working on further inland at LYMPHE ON 15 March 1962 one section of pipe-mine exploded killing Mr H G Borrek and injuring Mr P Masur both skilled BD Operators who had been deployed on BD at least since 1948.

It was decided that the accident was probably caused by polar blasting gelignite which had deteriorated over the years causing the exudation of liquid nitro-glycerine which would be very sensitive to touch or shock. This was the first serious BD accident since two NCOs were killed on TRIMINGHAM minefield in May 1953.

ANNEX F.

Coastal Minefield Clearance.

First page of this ANNEXE is missing.

Approximately 547 beach mines and 20 A/T mines of the above total were recovered from Mundesley/Trimingham minefields.

4. By 1963, it was assessed that some 937 of the Original 1000 B Type C mines ? had been accounted for, and, that this degree of clearance was probably considerably better than that achieved on other minefields. The number of mines discovered was diminishing year by year so it was concluded that the task no longer required the undivided attention of a complete mine disposal troop, but there was still a need for a flying squad to be available in the Norfolk area to deal with random finds and to undertake residual tasks associated with the MUNDESLEY, TRIMINGHAM and SIDESTRAND minefields.

5. Consequently, when 1 BD Troop was assigned to more general disposal duties, one Section was earmarked for mine and minefield operations. This Section was composed of 1 S/Sgt, 1 Sgt, 2 Cpls and 13 civilians including clerks and drivers etc. Up to that point a full minefield troop had consisted of 1 Officer (Capt), 1 WO 2, 17 Ors and 35 Civilians.

6. During 1965 it was decided that the MUNDESLEY Mine Section should continue to patrol the minefields, and provided cliffs were suitably fenced and adequate and danger notices were displayed, pathways to the beach were cleared and clearly sign posted and marked, that the beach could be opened to the public during the Summer of 1966. This decision was only made after considerable soul-searching and considerable discussion, however, the view was taken that the cliffs apart, in this area was no more hazardous than similar area around the coast which had already been opened for public use.

ANNEX G.

Supplementary BD Tasks. 1958 – 1968.

1. During the 1960s, HQ BD Unit (UK) was often called upon to provide personal and equipment for supplementary tasks such as bomb and other ordnance clearance, abroad, or the clearance of pipe-mines from airfields and depth charges and other demolition charge from bridges at home.
2. Assistance was given in completing bomb clearance in Germany, North Africa, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, and in the enormous task of clearing Japanese 50kg, 250 and 500 kg bombs from pits and bunkers in PENANG ISLAND, MALAYA. Nearer home, in 1967, considerable effort went into clearing unexploded ordnance from the islands of Guernsey and Alderney, and throughout the period many bridges were investigated for the presence of anti-invasion demolition charges.
3. Bomb Disposal in BETIO and PENANG. Two most interesting and hazardous overseas tasks were undertaken by Major H P Qualtrough MBE RE supported by Sgt J Cooke BEM RE between Oct 65 and Mar 66. The main task was to clear explosives from the small islet of BETIO in the Gilbert and Ellice

group of Islands, and a subsidiary task, to be undertaken en-route to BETIO, was to undertake a full reconnaissance of the Japanese mine and bomb dumps on PENANG to determine the extent of the outstanding work and state of the ordnance.

4. PENANG. The recce in PENANG was to cover 9 remaining tunnels on the eastern side of the island. One group of tunnels had already been cleared by 11 Field Squadron in 1950 and the general location of the remainder was known.
5. The work of locating the various pits and tunnels was carried out under the most difficult and trying conditions and several bombs had to be opened up for subsequent analysis as to their condition. Work went on in PENANG until sometime in Nov 65 and the team then set off to clear the explosives from BETIO.
6. BETIO (TARAWA). The bulk of the explosives here were contained in about 4 collapsed bunkers. The task, which with hindsight, looked quite formidable which was carried out by two specialists was to excavate the bunkers by hand, to remove the High Explosives for sea dumping and to re-inter any human remains found, and finally to mine detect the whole island. The task was completed by Mar 66, and some measure of the (the rest of this Annex is missing.)