

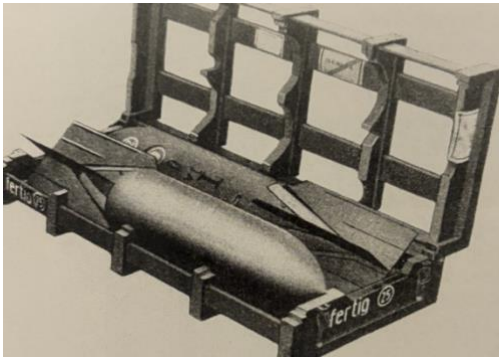
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How on earth did that get there?

A wartime edition of the British magazine 'Punch' included a cartoon featuring an old chap describing a recent bombing raid to a passerby "They almost hit the factory the night they bombed my house". A consequence of bombing drift, creep and aerodynamic variations within the bomb load (let alone navigational error and evasive manoeuvring) was that many locations received bombs unexpectedly. 'Precision bombing', by the standards of today's guided weapons, is not a wholly appropriate term to describe the raids of any air force during WW2. Helpfully, the Nazi science writer Paul Karlson provided some indication of how the Luftwaffe addressed this deficiency. An article in 'Der Adler' magazine (1942) suggested accuracy was becoming the norm due to the superior understanding of science held by the Nazis . . . Despite that assertion, a wide variety of non-strategic 'targets' required the constant attention of bomb disposal (BD) units.

WW2

While there were undoubtedly many remarkable feats of flying and bomb aiming, iron bombs were affected by a range of intractable variables. Minor variations in mass, shape or distortion of a bomb's tail could lead to an unpredictable trajectory. (German photographs often show the care with which their bombs were protected in transit). The historical record of British bomb disposal during WW2 provides a number of examples of unexploded bombs (UXB) discovered in testing locations. Chris Ransted, for example, in his book *'Bomb Disposal in World War Two'* (pp.24-5), mentions bombs in graveyards. Les Stokes, whilst serving with **156 Bomb Disposal Section**, was tasked



to the bombed Abby Park Cemetery, at Stoke Newington.

"Our little bit of action was between two graves. We made a start [digging]... and soon both sides had collapsed exposing the two coffins. We had to timber the excavation all round and the smell was diabolical" (Images from a similar task in South Shields)

There are also instances of UXBs being dealt with in churches and cathedrals, within the fetid confines of gasometers and under sports pitches and parks (including in at least one boating lake), on farmland and in woods. One UXB impacted at Lords cricket ground; and then penetrated to such a depth it broke through into a Bakerloo Line tunnel of the London Underground. Concerns about this happening under the River Thames led to some interesting sound monitoring work being conducted during raids (listening for a 'plop' in close proximity to a tunnel - but with no following bang!)

Prior to guided weapons, the answer to the problem of inaccurate bombing lay, in part, to launching attacks at low-level. However, this approach attracted a different problem pertinent to BD. The abstract below is from the logbook of a Spitfire pilot of 145 Squadron RAF, in Italy during 1944-45. The failure noted during the last sortie was attributed to the bombs falling from insufficient altitude to allow fuzes to arm. In all likelihood, the numerous UXBs from British fighter-bombers were simply left by the Germans for the advancing allies ground forces to deal with . . .

TIME	ALTITUDE	REMARKS
08.10	1.45	BOMBED + STRAFED 6 LOCOS - H.A.A. OVER COAST.
15.35	.40	N.M. ON OAS. POST - STRAFED - SLIGHT L.A.A.
06.40	1.55	NOTHING SEEN - BOMBED RLY. LINE - NO FLAK.
08.05	.35	V.N.M. ON TARGET, LITTLE H.A.A. PULLING OUT.
14.05	1.45	VERY POOR VIS. RETURNED ON HOMING - NO FLAK.
14.55	1.20	D.H. ON LINE - 3 BOMBS DIDN'T EXPLODE - NO FLAK.

Experiences after WW2: more of the same

Almost forty-years after the end of WW2, similar consequences to those outlined above were witnessed during the Falklands war. Gallant bomb disposal action was noted on British warships penetrated by 1000lb UXBs and to bombs at the refrigeration plant at Ajax Bay (the 'Red and Green Life Machine' Field Hospital). And, in a re-run of wartime experiences with gasometers, a Luftwaffe bomb was dealt with in 1986, at Beckton in London: for which Major Robbie Hall and Sapper John Wright (shown below), and Staff Sergeant Nigel Daley, were each awarded the Queens Gallantry Medal.



Images: Mast-height attack by an Argentinian 'Dagger'; S(D) Stan Bowles and LS(D) Dave Southwell RN, on HMS Argonaut; HMS Antelope, on which SSgt James (Jim) Prescott RE was killed in action; Ajax Bay refrigeration plant bomb - parachute visible



While it is reasonable to surmise that an unexploded bomb within which the fuze has failed to arm represents a 'quick win' in bomb disposal terms, it is worth remembering that in many cases this status cannot be known for certain. For example, a delay action bomb quietly counting down (by mechanical, chemical or electronic means), a stuck timer awaiting a jolt to free it, a passive anti-disturbance trembler, etc., are also possibilities. When a bomb cannot be left in situ to *wait and see*, then as the examples from wartime illustrate, the risk management landscape changes. To quote from one of the modest giants of WW2 bomb disposal - Colonel Bertram Stuart Trevelyan Archer:

"But then you had to take a chance, otherwise you were not doing the job you had been sent to do" (from an interview recorded by IWM)

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