

Scatsta Airfield, Shetland, Scotland.

Operation Crabstick, Pipe Mine Clearance

January 1999.

The newspaper articles were added to our face book page by Paul Watson. These were forwarded to Simon Cook who was the OC of the Unit at the time and he shared it with Ross Holme who was the SSM.

Between them they have got their memories working and here is what the recall of the task.

In late 1998 the OC of 22 HQ Sqn was instructed to deploy a team to Scatsta Airfield, Shetland which was located 750 miles away from Carver Barracks in Essex. Under the terms of Operation Crabstick and as part of Military Assistance to Civilian Authorities (MACA) the aim was to re-locate and remove dangerous WWII pipe mines that had been buried beneath the what was a former Royal Air Force airfield. Following a successful reconnaissance by the OC and SSM, two EOD teams deployed to Shetland in early January 1999 to conduct an operation to support the runway's extension through the removal of nine pipe-mines that had been identified on a previous clearance operation but that could not then be removed.

The team included bomb disposal officers, plant operator mechanics, combat engineers and support staff along with two remote controlled medium crawler excavators which were each fitted with CCTV cameras together with a Saxon armoured, command and control vehicle.

Because pipe-mimes were filled with cartridges of unstable and deteriorating polar blasting gelignite, there was the risk of initiating a high order detonation as they were being uncovered. Given the remote-controlled plant and operating from under armour at a significant safety stand off distance, plant operators could excavate and uncover buried pipe mines safely, even in worst case detonation scenario.

The deployment team had taken over a local hotel just 20 minutes' drive away from the airfield in the hamlet of Hillswick which proved to be vital as working hours were not only limited but also interrupted regularly with work having to stop, not only for scheduled departing and arriving aircraft but also due to the severe and inclement weather causing excavations to fill with rainwater, which had to be pumped out-constantly. Both factors increased the planned durations for excavation and render safe operations associated with each pipe-mine, although the Squadron worked hard to ensure that completion time frames were met not least through the OC's close liaison with the airfield manager where an operations room was located (in very warm and dry conditions).

Notwithstanding the challenging and dangerous circumstances, the work was completed on schedule enabling the extension of the runway to be undertaken on time and with contractor safety assured.

Simon Cook and Ross Holme.

Our thanks to Simon and Ross for putting this together it helps us to continue to save and share out history.

Sappers shovel bombs away at Scatsta

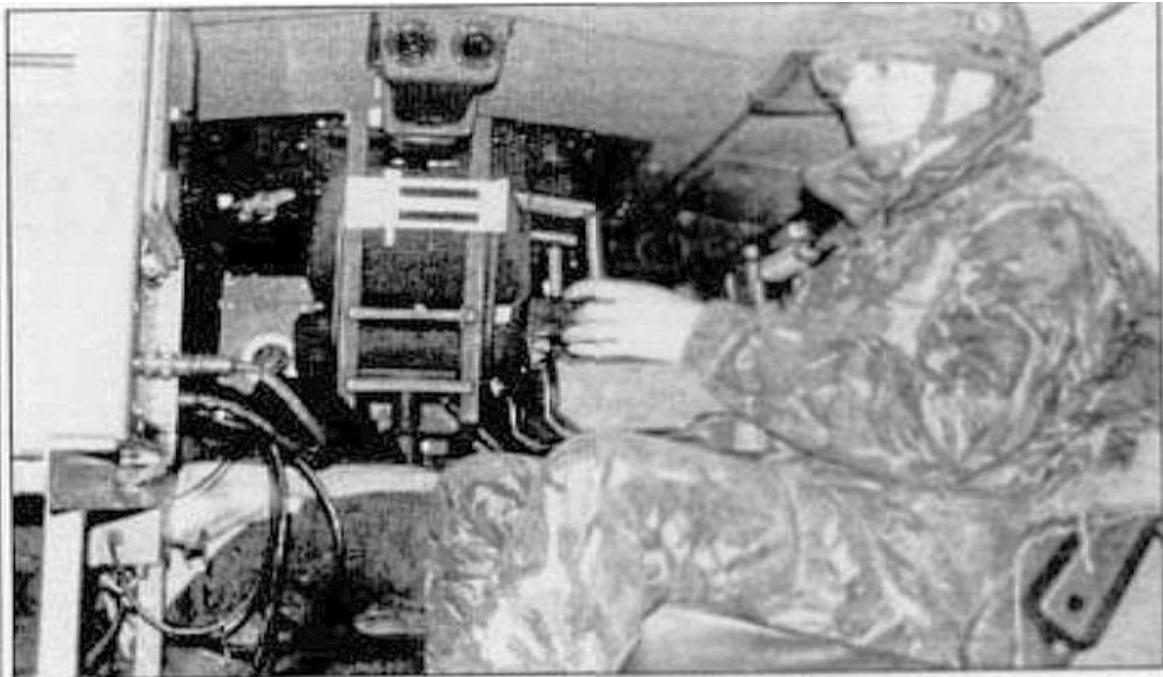


Some of the sappers at work in one of the trenches excavated at Scatsta. *Photo: Gordon Stove*



Sergeant Major Russ Holmes and Sapper David Urbaniak with a section of recently-excavated pipe mine at the edge of the Scatsta runway. This piece contained no explosives.

Photo: Gordon Stove



At a safe distance Lance Corporal Luke Allum uses the television monitor screens and the controls in the modified armoured personnel carrier to operate the remotely controlled excavator as it exposes a pipe mine.

Photo: Gordon Stove

NINETEEN Royal Engineers have been busy laying to rest the skeletons that have haunted Scatsta Airport since the Second World War.

The skeletons — all 42 of them — are pipe mines, which were laid at intervals under the runways and in concentrated areas at the ends of each runway.

The pipes, each about six inches in diameter and around 80 feet long were originally laid with the intention of filling them with gelignite which could be exploded should there ever be a chance that the runway might fall into enemy hands.

There was some debate locally as to whether any explosives were

ever placed in any of the pipes, and some people suggested that the whole exercise might be a wild goose chase.

Sergeant Major Ross Holmes was responsible for one of the two teams of sappers working at each end of the runway. The 19-strong team are drawn from the 22 H.Q. Squadron (Explosives Ordnance Division) and 33 Engineer Regiment (EOD) based in Essex.

On a wet Saturday afternoon Sergeant Major Holmes had a familiar Shetland problem to battle with. "The lads are experiencing problems with the exceptionally high water table," he said.

Indeed, among the vast quantity of equipment shipped in on three giant low-loaders the busiest piece of plant seemed to be a small portable pump that sucked grimy water away from the ends of the uncovered pipes as fast as it filled the holes.

The most impressive piece of hardware in use had to be a remote-controlled tracked excavator. Complete with four small video cameras on the jib, roof, rear of the engine and the cab, it is capable of being operated from a specially modified armoured personnel carrier (APC) at a distance of a kilometre.

Inside the armoured personnel carrier a monitor with its screen split into four shows the perspectives seen by each camera. These, along with a replica set of excavator levers helped Lance Corporal Luke Allum to gingerly

clear the ends of the pipe mines.

Once a small section of pipeline was cleared, the ends were inspected to see whether or not they had been sealed with concrete. If they had this was taken as a sign that the pipe was not explosively charged and that its removal was low risk and continued digging would not need to be remotely controlled.

It became clear after the first six

or so pipes had been uncovered that they were all filled with concrete and that, as the risk of exposure to live explosives was small, excavation and removal could be continued along more conventional lines.

Using a detailed map to pinpoint the location of the pipe mines, the squad was pleased on Saturday with the progress made so far. According to the man in

overall charge of the operation, Major Simon Cook, they had at that point uncovered at least 26 of the 42 mines.

Four of the pipe mines on the map are away from the runways and near the main road, which passes to the east of runway.

The biggest hazard apart from the risk of gelegnite lurking in the pipes and the high water table were service ducts for electricity and telecom lines both, of which fell foul of the work. A water mains pipe running parallel to a pipe mine and less than a foot from it was causing a particular headache, although it was quite a pleasant problem when compared to dealing with booby-trapped cars in Ulster.

The sappers finished dealing with the mines on Tuesday, finding no explosives during the operation, and a number headed for Lerwick in the evening to enjoy the Up-Helly-A festivities. They spent Wednesday and yesterday replenishing their stores and carrying out reinstatement work and were due to take a well-earned day off today before leaving for Aberdeen on tomorrow's boat.

During the work they have been staying at the St Magnus Hotel. Tonight as a token of their appreciation at the way they have been looked after they will be presenting a plaque to the hotel before their departure.

29 January 1999

Shetland Times

Lerwick, Shetland, Scotland