

Pipe Mine Clearance.

Pipe mines had been laid on airfields to be detonated to deny the Germans their use on an attempt to invade England. They also had been laid as a method to create anti-tank ditches in strategic places if the need arose.

In November 1942 a decision was made to stop the programme of laying pipe mines as the threat of invasion receded. At this time there were 30 sites that had either been laid completely or were under way.

There had been at the request of the RAF several airfields that the pipes either had the explosives removed and in other the pipes had also been removed. Records were not conclusive as to what had been done and where.

In 1944 instructions were issued stating that only if the explosives within the mines was deemed to be dangerous that further pipes were to be unloaded of content. Apart from such emergency work no maintenance would be carried out and all charged pipes (pipes filled with explosives) were to be left alone. This was due to there being a lack of specialist manpower to carry out the clearance work. Although there is suggestion that permission was to be sought for the removal of all pipe mines.

There were three Royal Canadian Engineer Units capable of removing the mines in the UK at the wars end, these being 5, 6, 7 Artisans Companies these and Royal Engineer Units were involved in clearance operations.

It is known that 261 (West Country) Field Park Company in September 1945, were sent to lift mines from Teignmouth to Plymouth and they were identified as McNaughton mines. These were not on airfields but at vital crossroads. The procedure was to remove the explosive fill and then using a hydraulic jack remove the pipe. There was no exact number of mines recorded as being laid.

There appears that there was a lack of or records missing as to where mines were laid. Therefore, there was nothing to clearly indicate if an area had been cleared completely. So, mines were missed, and clearance continued for many years.

Apart from records not being available there were other issues that complicated the operations. Mines when laid did not always stay in straight lines, if a rock or hard object was hit by the pipe it could deviate from its intended path, the pipe may have gone deeper or shallower than intended. On some airfields metal track way had been laid on the grass areas, which had to be cleared before locators would pick up the mines. Removal of this track way left many metal pieces all over which also caused issues.

Blame has been laid in numerous directions as to why the clearance was incomplete. These include:

- a. Incomplete, in accurate and missing records.

- b. No joined together approach, of strategy for the clearance.
- c. Airfield mines, being removed or emptied, for various reasons and no complete records as to what had been done.
- d. The Canadian Engineers not completing the task before returning home, even though Royal Engineer Units were also involved
- e. Issues when laying, pipes spurring of the planned path.
- f. This was a new procedure, never attempted before and a learning curve for all concerned.

The reality is it that the clearance operations did fail, probably for a mixture of the reasons previously given. The same would be said for the laying of the beach minefields, with standard mines. Never practised and undertaken on the scale it was before. Recording of locations and exact locations of each mine, never attempted on this scale. Newly trained troops, with little time to practise carrying out the tasks.

This leads us into the next section post war clearance.

Post War Clearance.

There is a mention on [Lympne Airport In The 50s - a nostalgic memory of Lympne \(francisfrith.com\)](http://francisfrith.com) that a horse that was being grazed on the edge of Lympne Airfield triggered a pipe mine, however it is not known if clearance carried out after the event on the whole area.

On the 15 March 1962 one unfortunate Ukrainian was excavating a hole at Lympne airfield when he came across a long metal pipe, it is suggested that he hit it, it exploded killing him.

The following Court of Inquiry unearthed the facts of the pipe mining operations and doubts were expressed as to the thoroughness of the Canadian clearance operations. As a result of the inquiry a programme of new searches was put into motion, but it was acknowledged that it would take some time.

In 1981 there was only one Regular Army Troop in 49 Field Squadron (EOD). 33 Engineer Regiment (EOD) in late 1981 as second troop was formed and its predominant task was Operation Crabstick, clearance of pipe mines from airfields.

I recall that Manston, Thorney Island, Ford, Hawkinge, Martlesham Heath, Rochester, Shoreham, Tangemere, Southend were worked on between 1982 and 1987. I am sure others reading this can add to the list.

There were reports and clearance done also at the following as part of Op Crabstick.

Detling 1989

Gravesend

Lee-on Solent HMS Daedalus 2006

This is not a complete list.

Picture from Rey Fadil from RAF Manston



Picture

- a. Section of uncovered pipe mine.
- b. Explosive charge.
- c. Explosive charge.
- d. Collection of charges.
- e. Pipe mine after opened by cutting charge after explosive charge removed.
- f. Long section of uncovered pipe.

