United Kingdom Beach Mine Fields.

With the fall of France, the United Kingdom, stood along with the threat of probable Invasion. Ports and beaches that could be used for landing sites were identified and prioritised to be defended. Minefields were initially laid, that later were removed and re-laid or strengthened. There was a massive programme of construction of defences built along the coast, backed up by further defences in land.

The Corps was involved in a heavy programme of developing defences around the United Kingdom, from June 1940 to June 1942 it was a time of preparation, defences, including blocking egress from beaches, anti-tank and personnel obstacles and wiring. Between these obstacles extensive minefields were laid.

For the Corps, assisted by other units, it was the first time that they had been involved in large scale laying of minefields. Drills had not been fully developed in the laying, recording, and marking or practised in laying mines. Therefore, those carrying out the task lacked experience and the operations were hurried. This was to cause the Corps issues latter, when the fields were lifted. By 1940 it was apparent that an organisation was needed to deal with unexploded ordnance, this fell to the Corps and Bomb Disposal was formed. (1)

Since the end of World War 11, numerous books, articles, programmes have covered the role of Bomb Disposal. However very few give details into the role that the Corps were involved in of clearing mines from our coast line or the sacrifice given. All though many Royal Engineers were involved in clearance operations, this article covers BD Units involvement.

What was the scale of minefields laid around the United Kingdom.

There were around 2,000 minefields laid around the United Kingdom's coast line, with around 350,00 mines. Majority of which were laid in East Anglia. (2)

Various mines were used, one of the more commons being the B Type C, These were available from Naval stores. These contained 11.4kg of usually Amatol. It had a low initiation pressure of 27kg which meant the fuze could be activated by a person's body weight. A bow spring separated the striker from a primer. The bow spring over a period weakened as the mine deteriorated. This effectively made it more sensitive and was seen as a contributing factor for casualties, through clearance operations. (3)

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Photo from the Imperial War Museum Collection.

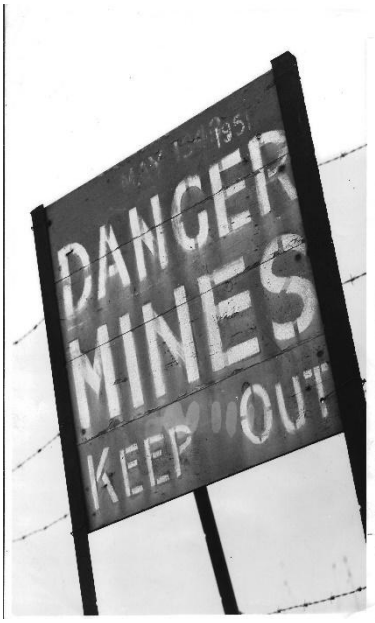

Photo P Markham collection. Trimingham 1953.

During and post war these minefields caused casualties both to military and civilians alike. To give two examples;

1. Some men of an infantry unit holding defences near Chichester, strayed into a minefield. A mine was stepped on and there were fatalities and others wounded. Major AHM Morris OC 262 Field Company RE with a detachment cleared a path for the casualties and bodies to be recovered. He was awarded the George Medal (4) (5)
2. 1943. Civilian Ben J Payne aged 65 lost his life to a mine on the cliffs while hunting rabbits. Two boys also lost their lives to mines a third survived. (6)

Clearance Operations.

By 1943 the threat of invasion had receded and work on clearance of the coastal minefields was started. Many Royal Engineer Units were initially involved. No disrespect to them or the sacrifice they made to making the coastal areas safe. However, for this article it is around the BD Units involved from 1944, as it then became a Bomb Disposal responsibility to post war. It is an aspect of Bomb Disposal Units work that has not been greatly covered. The hazardous work this involved resulted in an award of the General Service Medal 1945-49 Bomb and Mine Clearance, for those who spent 180 days active engagement or died on these operations during the period May 1945 to December 1949. There were 1400 awarded to BD personnel.

The Bomb Disposal Units were;

1 BD Coy/Squadron, 2 BD Coy, 2 BD Coy (POW), 3 BD Coy, 4 BD Coy/ Battle Area Clearance Unit, 6 BD Coy, 10 BD Coy, 7 BD Coy, 9 BD Coy, 10 BD Coy (POW), 11 BD Coy, 11 BD Coy (POW), 12 BD Coy, 16 BD Coy, 16 BD Coy (POW), 20 BD Coy, BD Unit (Ukraine). (7).

More on POW and Ukraine units in a future article

The hazardous encountered through these operations were not just because it was an explosive device. As mentioned earlier, laying recording, and marking when they were laid was still in its infancy, so not all records were accurate. The mines had been laid between June 1940 to June 1942, and had deteriorated as mentioned earlier. For those laid in sandy areas, sand had drifted and moved some yards away from where they were laid. The sand had covered them so they were at a deeper depth than laid, putting them deeper than detectors could reach. On the cliff areas there had been erosion, collapsing areas. There was also sadly at times human errors made by those conducting the operations.

Many different options to clearance were used including water jetting, manual clearance with the Polish Mine Detector, using the No 4A detector and with the Electrical Research Association Locator. (3)

There was extreme pressure from the public for the beaches to be made safe, from perspectives of public safety and the local economy from the lack of tourism. The last beach to be cleared was at Trimingham, Norfolk and the barriers finally came down on Monday 1 August 1966, 26 years after the last time the public were able to use the beaches. 27 Royal Engineers died along the Norfolk coast line and are Remembered on a memorial at Mundesley, Norfolk. (6)

Photos P Markham collection. Top left, Water Jetting, Folkestone, Kent 1953. Top right, Fairlight Glen, Hastings, Sussex, 1956. Bottom, Water Jetting, detonates a mine Folkestone, Kent 1953.

As we all know the story does not end there, over the years more mines have been found around our coast line, we still do not know what is still to be unearthed.

There have been figures published that put the casualty rates for these operations between 140 to 150 fatalities, with an unknown number injured. This is ongoing research, however so far, there have been 138 BD fatalities identified, on mine clearance in the UK between 1943 to 1953. In the period 1940 to 53 whilst serving including, bomb explosions, accidents, and natural causes another 462 fatalities. There have been 6 George Medals, 9 Members of the British Empire and 28 British Empire Medals awarded for Mine Clearance in the UK. More undergoing research to confirm at this time. So, a question can be asked as to why, this aspect of BD Units work has not been covered in great details as compared to work on Bombs?

There is much more to this chapter on a role that Bomb Disposal took in clearing our coastline, which I am sure will be continued in another article in the future.

To conclude the coroner recorded at the inquest Cpl K Braddock and Sergeant RJ O'Doherty who died 6 May 1953.

One does not mourn brave men; one salutes them. That morning a mine was detected and marked with a cone about two fifths of the way up the cliff. Both men saw this cone. In the afternoon an explosion was heard. Those investigating found a crater with a body some 50 yards away. Parts of another body were found over a wide area. The coroner said that the men were on a particularly dangerous job which they faced with cool-headed courage, and they earned the gratitude of the people of the village and Norfolk. He continued that they died just as much for their country in 1953 as if the accident happened in 1943. (6)

1. **History of the Corps of Royal Engineers. Vol V111. 1938 to 1948. Pages 105 to 131.**
2. **Rely Evans** https://issuu.com/cisr-journal/docs/journal21-1/s/103656
3. **History of the Corps of Royal Engineers. Vol X. 1948 to 1960. Pages 288 to 290.**
4. **National Archive File WO373/16/574** Recommendation for Award for Morris, A H M Rank: Captain Regiment: 262... | The National Archives
5. **History of the Corps of Royal Engineers. Vol V111. 1938 to 1948. Page 139.**
6. **Book. Trimingham. A Singular Village. Roger Kirk.**

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Mine Clearance Memorials in the UK.

Caister, Norfolk.

Memorial Plaque by the Lifeboat Station in Caister.

Since it was erected a 27 casualty has been identified.

Emmaus Fort Shop, Archcliffe Fort, Dover, Kent.

The plaque is to remember those named, who died clearing Shakespeare Beach of mines laid as part of the anti-invasion measures. Arranged by a local resident Phil Eydon and purchased by the Royal Engineers Association, Bomb Disposal Branch. Branch members in attendance

Photo Credit Royal Engineers Association Bomb Disposal Branch.

Lowestoft, Suffolk.

This plaque was dedicated on the 11 November 2025, in Ness Park, Lowestoft.

Mundesley Mine Clearance Memorial, Norfolk

To the 27 Royal Engineers who died clearing mines, laid as part of the anti-invasion measures around the Norfolk Coast.


We Will Remember Them
NFRS
MUNDESLEY LIFEBOAT

All Photos Credit to

[Mundesley landmine Memorial | Facebook]

Wells-on-Sea Norfolk.

Memorial to those who died laying and clearing the Minefields used as part of the anti-invasion measures around the UK.

Adrian Dwyer, a former Royal Engineer Bomb Disposal Officer and Wells resident, researched the deaths. He noted that "When the fear of invasion by the Nazis was at its height, Royal Engineers – with very little training or familiarity with Beach Mines – worked under enormous pressure to lay more than 300,000 mines at Britain's most vulnerable beaches. After D-Day, during the systematic clearance operation to return the land to public use, it was found that many of these weapons had moved in shifting sands and become exceptionally sensitive due to corrosion by salt water. Both tasks (and continuing clearance post-war) took a significant toll of the young men involved."

This new plaque has been made possible with the support of the Royal Engineers Association (Bomb Disposal Branch), the RE Bomb Disposal History Group, the Wells War Memorial Institute Club, and the Dwyer family.