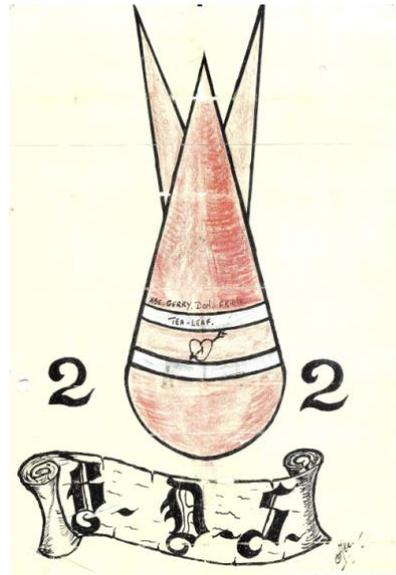


RE BD EOD & Search
History Group

Bitesize BD

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Queen Mary's bomb?

One of the most recognisable emblems of Royal Engineer Bomb Disposal (RE BD) is the Battle Honour: the gold bomb with the two blue bands on the distinctive red background. It was devised by Queen Mary at the beginning of the Blitz and has been worn with pride by those serving with Sapper bomb disposal units ever since. (The image of one such man - Sgt. John 'Jack' Wilfred Bramley RE - is shown above.) The Royal Navy has a similar badge and the RAF version also features a vertical iron bomb. The RE bomb has many imitators, often displaying a discernible nod towards the work of Queen Mary and her guild of embroiderers. However, for the sharp-eyed, a question hangs over the late-war and post-war versions: how close are they to the original design? The answer is *quite*, but the evolution of the Battle Honour is an intriguing tale.

The story of the battle honour is relatively well-known and is given prominence in Chris Ransted's excellent book 'Bomb Disposal in World War Two': Queen Mary wanted to recognise the work of BD and make those serving readily identifiable. The significance of the colours chosen in 1940 is open to some debate. Unhelpfully, the image of the badge held by the Imperial War Museum is monochrome but does show the initials 'BD': a feature absent from production badges. However, using a range of sources - including examples of hand-drawn wartime images (as shown on the first page) - one interpretation of the Battle Honour's design is offered here!



The first pattern. All of the 'first pattern' badges were produced in red, gold and blue, and embroidered on the distinctive oval background (as in the example shown above, right).

RED

Used to identify the danger of BD and draw attention to the critical role of the wearer.



BLUE

The blue bands signify Royal Engineers, as noted on the stable belt, etc. There is also a suggestion that the bands signify the ropes used to haul the bomb from the depths of a shaft. Some have also suggested they represent the 'capture' or 'taming' of the UXB.



GOLD/YELLOW

There is some debate about the original colour of the bomb but two factors are relevant.

Firstly, the British Bombs Queen Mary would have seen whilst visiting RAF aerodromes were painted yellow (see the image at the introduction).

Secondly, the colour contrasted well with the red – making the badge and its wearer even more noticeable.

The 'economy' badge. But what about the wartime version that had **black bands** around the nose and black locking stitches, and was mounted on a rectangular backing? The front and reverse images of what is sometimes called the 'economy' version of the mid-war period are shown centre and left. The changes were probably not a design choice but forced upon manufacturers due to a) a shortage of blue yarn and b) the need to secure the longer horizontal stitches running across the bomb's body. . . True or not, the black elements lasted only for a short period. Although, when the design reverted to the original colours, the detailing did become noticeably different. These badges are sometimes called 'second pattern' but many slight variations were notable during the later war-years and onward into the present day.



Over time, the very tight and short blocks of stitching, used to give the appearance of a solid yellow body became a series of well-defined blocks of yellow: giving the bomb's shape the appearance of a mosaic. This, again, was possibly another economy measure to simplify production. However, it is interesting that a design change related only to the embroidery process (that is, to prevent the yellow threads of the body panel from sagging), was then transferred to screen printed badges. The printed example above (right), mimics the no longer present embroidered lines of the locking stitches. Was this really a style choice? The evidence suggests not.

Looking at the two examples below, one produced locally in the Falklands in the 1980s and the other as issued today, they are immediately recognisable as Queen Mary's design – but questions remain: were the changes deliberate or functional? Were they dictated by the cheaper embroidery process or as a result of an active decision to change the bomb's appearance? The answer is debatable; but what is clear is that the appearance of a segmented or 'mosaic' bomb played no part of the Battle Honour as envisaged by Queen Mary.

