

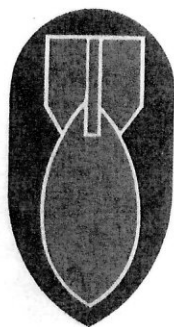
The Ordnance Department Bomb Disposal Squad in World War II

Creating an Identity Distinct from Its British Origins

by Karl L. Rubis, *Ordnance Branch Historian, US Army Ordnance School*

Note: This is the final article in a trilogy of related articles which focus on the three core competencies of the Ordnance Corps. "The US Army Ordnance Department at the Dawn of the Civil War," appeared in the Fall 2011 issue of Ordnance Magazine; The second article, "Mobile Ordnance Repair Shops in World War I," appeared in the Winter 2012 issue of the Ordnance Magazine.

On December 15, 1941, one week following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Mr. Warren of the Army Ordnance Department inspected the unexploded bomb buried six feet into the ground at Schofield Barracks. Nearby lay a crashed and burned Japanese plane, assumedly the previous owner of the bomb. Following several strong jerks from a safe distance, Mr. Warren dug up the bomb. Five days later, L. J. Unertle unscrewed the fuse assemblies after it had been moved to a deboosting barricade. In the course of the next week, these Army Ordnance officials in conjunction with officers and sailors of the 14th Naval District Advanced Mine Unit defused the first recorded unexploded bomb to be used against American forces in World War II. In the incident report, Lieutenant Draper L. Kauffman (US Navy Reserve) detailed the "whole-hearted cooperation" by Colonel Webster A. Capron of the Army Ordnance Department and recognized the "coolness, courage, and common sense of L. J. Unertle."¹

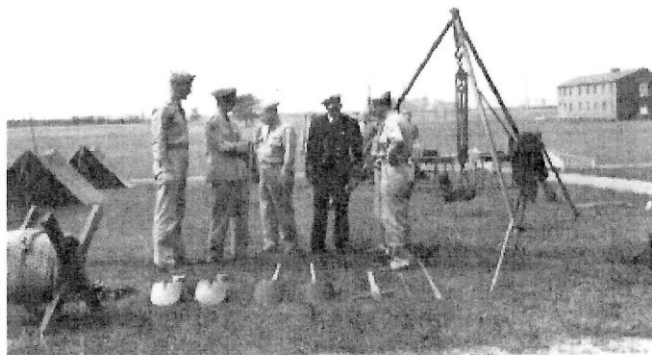


The original bomb disposal patch authorized in September 1942 at the Ordnance Department Bomb Disposal School.

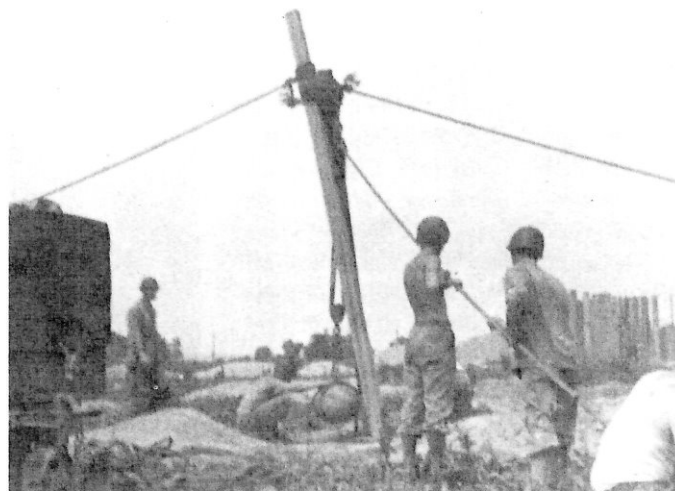
Despite this successful episode, the US Army entered World War II (WWII) with little, if any, experience in bomb disposal operations. Yet, by the end of the war, American BDS created their own unique identity through their collective combat experience in the Pacific and Europe. They developed beyond their singular role of rendering safe aerial bombs and became experts in all types of munitions in all types of environments.

US Army Ordnance Department Bomb Disposal School

Previously, the training, techniques, and procedures of bomb disposal had been dominated by the British WWII experience. Between Autumn 1940 and Spring 1941, the German Luftwaffe pummeled British cities. In response, the Royal Engineers established company-sized, bomb disposal units to deal with the unexploded bombs (UXB.) In addition, it created a school to train Soldiers and Civilians in the recognition and methods of dealing with unexploded



Display of the equipment carried by a bomb disposal squad at the Bomb Disposal School at Aberdeen Proving Ground



The 41st Bomb Disposal Squad hoists an excavated unexploded bomb in Europe. This type of activity characterizes the initial conception of bomb disposal responsibilities in theater

ordnance, predominately German bombs dropped during the Blitz.²

When the US Army Ordnance Department established its bomb disposal school at Aberdeen Proving Ground in January 1942, it reflected the obvious influence of the British experience. However, the American experience in WWII would push bomb disposal units in a very different direction.

In August 1942, the curriculum at the Bomb Disposal School consisted of five courses to support its two missions: (1) supply basic knowledge of bomb disposal to Soldiers and Civilians and (2) train officers and Soldiers for combat. Courses A, B, and C focused on basic skills related to bomb reconnaissance for Civilians and military. Course A (*Bomb Reconnaissance Course*) lasted 4 hours and was intended for all military personnel for basic familiarization with aerial dropped bombs. Course B (*Bomb Reconnaissance Instructors' Course*) was designed to train the instructors for Course A, and military and Civilians who would supervise bomb reconnaissance officers and non-commissioned officers. It was the longest of the three courses at 42 hours. Course C (*Bomb Reconnaissance Agent's Course*) was a 12 hour course for those who actually conducted bomb reconnaissance duties, officer or non-commissioned officer.³

The underlying intention of these three courses focused on the preparedness for a large airborne bombing raid conducted by German or Japanese aircraft. The design of the modules for each course assumed a large formation of aircraft bombing a target under clear Allied observation. These three courses clearly reflected the British experience of withstanding a prolonged, large-formation, bombing campaign, characteristic of the Blitz.

It was the latter two courses, Course D and Course X, in which the BDS received their training. Course D (*Bomb Disposal Platoon Sergeants' Course*) lasted 56½ hours and focused on all the skills necessary for the enlisted members of a bomb disposal squad. It focused on German and Japanese bombs and fuzes. Course X (*Bomb Disposal Officer's Course*) was the centerpiece of the school curriculum and trained the officers who were actually doing the work on the unexploded ordnance. It was the longest of the courses at 167 hours.⁴

These two courses also betray their British influence. The modules in the courses focused on German and Japanese aerial bombs and fuzes. Indeed, there was instruction in American and British ordnance, but the majority of the curriculum focused on German and Japanese aerial bombs and fuzes. However, one aspect carried over from the British which endured through the war was the expectation that only officers would perform the actual defusing of the unexploded ordnance, although battlefield conditions may have provided exceptions to this rule.

The 5th Bomb Disposal Squad and the Invasions of Attu and Kiska

The 5th Bomb Disposal Squad (Separate) was activated on February 12, 1943 at Aberdeen Proving Ground. Previously, the Ordnance Department copied the British model and established bomb disposal companies, eight of them by the end of 1942 (the 231st through 238th). However, it was deemed that a company-sized unit lacked the mobility desired to handle the volume of unexploded ordnance encountered. In spite of concerns voiced by the director of the Ordnance Department Bomb Disposal School, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Kane, that a small, separate unit would be treated as a step-child by the higher commands, a seven-man squad-size organization was adopted. The 1st Ordnance Bomb Disposal Squad (Separate) was activated on January 15, 1943. By the end of WWII, 219 BDS's had been created. This preference for small units remained the primary *modus operandi* for bomb disposal, later Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), through the Vietnam War.⁵

On June 3, 1943, the 5th BDS departed the Seattle Point of Embarkation following its trip from Aberdeen Proving Ground with Lieutenant Rodger, Technical Sergeant Rapp, Sergeant Marvin, Technicians Fifth Grade Peczynski, Johnson, Richardson, and Anderson. This squad had just completed their courses of instruction; six enlisted in Course D and Lieutenant Rodger in Course X. Its destination was Adak, Alaska where it drew more provisions in preparation for the invasion of Attu Island, Alaska.⁶

Following the landing on May 11, 1943, the 5th BDS arrived on Attu Island to conduct bomb clearance. It was the only bomb disposal squad that participated in the Attu invasion and the first to participate in an American operational landing. Unfortunately, the 5th BDS also suffered the first bomb disposal fatalities of WWII. Lieutenant Rodger and Technical Sergeant Rapp were killed while clearing ordnance on the island. Captain Patrick J. Hogan joined the 5th BDS and would remain its commanding officer for the rest of the war, following a temporary replacement by Captain George W. Helm, Alaska Department Bomb Disposal Officer.⁷

On July 14, the squad returned to Adak Island and prepared to participate in the invasion of Kiska Island. The 5th BDS landed on August 17, two days after the start of the invasion. Despite the evacuation of the island by the Japanese on July 28, the 5th BDS remained very busy due to the intense naval bombardment and aerial bombing that had been poured upon the island for the past year by American forces. Up to its departure in January 1944, the 5th BDS spent its time rendering safe all the unexploded American and Allied ordnance.⁸

The experience of the 5th BDS on Attu and Kiska presaged an aspect of American bomb disposal distinctly different than the British experience, and highlighted a weakness in the Ordnance Department Bomb Disposal School training curriculum. In Europe and the Pacific, a large part, and sometimes the majority of effort, of the American BDS's focused on rendering safe American and Allied ordnance, not just German or Japanese. Massive naval and aerial bombardment launched before a landing or an offensive became the norm in American operations. Consequently,

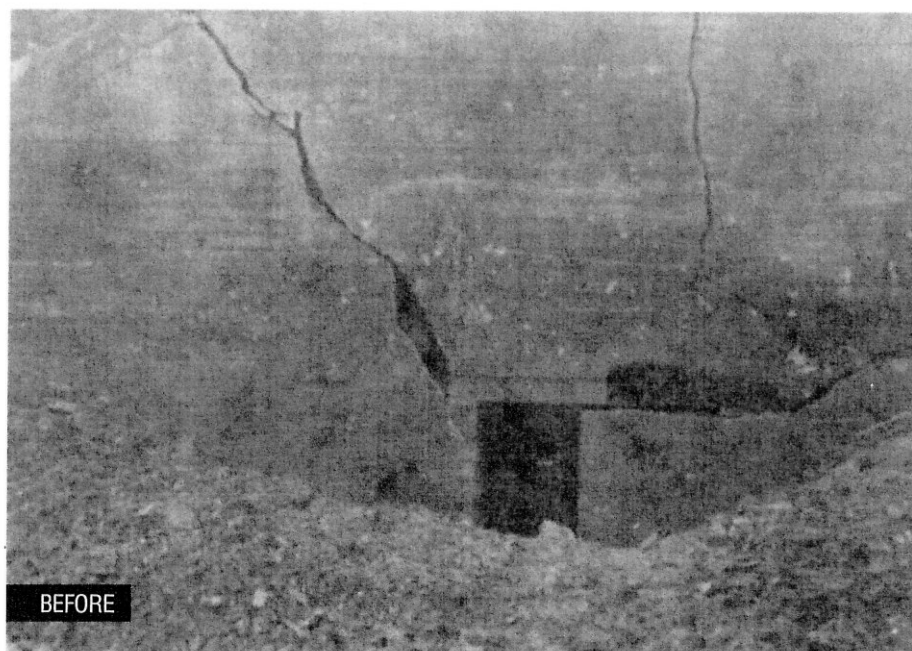


The 41st Bomb Disposal Squad recovering an unexploded German V-1 rocket in Belgium in 1944. Over 10,000 V-1 rockets were launched in 1944-1945. Each one carried a 1,900lb warhead. This was just one of the responsibilities the Bomb Disposal Squads assumed during the course of the war.

The Third Platoon utilized a unique method for bomb reconnaissance which would be replicated in other regions of Europe.

American and Allied troops often had to cross territory which had, only a short time earlier, been heavily bombed and shelled. BDS's that participated in landings on Sicily, Italy, Normandy, and offensives in France and Germany spent a significant amount of their time rendering safe American ordnance, so American Soldiers could continue the advance and not be killed by their own munitions.

Following duty at Kiska Island, the 5th BDS returned to Aberdeen Proving Ground for refresher training. Upon health examination, Technical Walden and Technician Fifth Grade Anderson were found unfit for further overseas duty. They were replaced by Technicians Fifth Grade Ronald Woolley and Donald Ware. Following their voyage to Great Britain, the 5th BDS was tasked to support VIII Corps, Third Army. Once in France, it provided support, not only to VIII Corps, but all the Corps of the Third Army and many of its division (often very close to the forward lines). This was another characteristic of American BDS's; they often worked for whichever unit needed their assistance, not just the one to which they belonged.⁹



One of the additional duties given to Bomb Disposal Squads was demolition of casemates. Here is the before and after image of a pillbox rendered useless.

The Third Platoon, 235th Bomb Disposal Company and the Invasion of Sicily

Two months after the landings at Attu Island, the Third Platoon, 235th Bomb Disposal Company landed at Gela, Sicily on July 13. Its experience would echo those of the 5th BDS. The 235th had been one of the eight bomb disposal companies formed at Aberdeen Proving Ground in 1942. Each company had its own area of responsibility. The 235th and 236th Bomb Disposal Companies were assigned to the North African and Italian theater. These compa-

nies were organized before the squad-size unit had become the accepted organizational structure. After the invasion of Sicily in October 1943, the 235th and 236th were broken up and the personnel were used to create the 131st through 153rd BDS's which remained in the Italian theater until the end of the war.¹⁰

In Sicily, the Third Platoon's experience reinforced the emerging trends of frequent changes to the unit it was designated to support and the increased amount of time it spent working on Allied ordnance. Initially, the Third Platoon was tasked to support the 1st Infantry Division. However, it was notified on July 19 that it had been moved under the umbrella of II Corps and had to support, not only the 1st Division, but also the 45th Division. Finally, on August 19, the Third Platoon was transferred to the aegis of the 7th Army to continue bomb disposal duties in Sicily.¹¹

The first unexploded ordnance the Third Platoon encountered were the 4kg Italian Manzolini fragmentation bombs dropped on an airfield. First Lieutenant Steve Todorovich, Third Platoon commander, wrote in the unit history that his men "cleaned out about 20 of these bombs simply by testing their marksmanship with a rifle." The next day, the platoon disposed of three 500kg German bombs dropped into the town of Vittoria. However, over the course of the next month, the platoon spent as much time, if not more, on American and British ordnance, including a 20-pound American fragmentation bomb lying in the 1st Division's command post.¹²

The Third Platoon utilized a unique method for bomb reconnaissance which would be replicated in other regions of Europe. Instead of actively looking for unexploded ordnance or waiting for a call (which often times was false,) First Lieutenant Todorovich would visit a town and direct its leadership to put together a list of all the unexploded ordnance in the area. He would return three days later, take one of the police officers as a guide, and render safe the unexploded ordnance. This method facilitated the swiftness of clearing ordnance, since it vastly decreased the amount of time to determine where the unexploded ordnance lay. It turned the whole village into a bomb reconnaissance unit.¹³

The 16th Bomb Disposal Squad and the Invasion of Europe

By June 6, 1944, the work conducted by American BDS's was well established. Disposal of American and Allied ordnance could equal, or even surpass, the amount of enemy ordnance and individual squads supported numerous unit echelon levels while operating on (or very near) the front lines. In clearing operations, squads would utilize the local populace as much as possible to assist in the location and preparation of ordnance for disposal. Ultimately, BDS's would be called upon to perform a variety of ordnance related tasks, even in very tangential ways.

On the morning of June 6, 1944, the 16th BDS found itself approximately eight miles off the coast of Normandy. They were scheduled to arrive at Omaha beach at H-hour (0630) plus 6 hours. However, due to problems with the bow doors of their Landing Ship Tank (LST), the Landing Craft Tank (LCT) had to push to the beach earlier than planned. Captain Marshall T. Crow and Technical Sergeant William J. Henry were delivered by their LCT onto Easy Red sector of Omaha Beach at H-hour plus 3 hours (0930). They were among the first Soldiers of any bomb disposal squad to arrive on the beaches of Normandy. They pushed up the beach to the vehicle transit area and waited for the rest of the 16th BDS to arrive. However, the rest of the squad did not arrive until the next day. Complications with the LST prevented the movement of troops off the ship and the squad did not rejoin Captain Crow and Technical Sergeant Henry until the next morning.¹⁴

Once the 16th BDS began operating on June 8, it revisited the experiences already laid out by other BD units. As it moved across France and Germany, it rendered safe American and Allied ordnance, as much as German ordnance. It worked on, not only aerial bombs, but all kinds of munitions. It operated close to the front line, moving often with the forward line of battle, often coming under attack. It cleared population centers behind the front line with the assistance of the local population.¹⁵

One of the unique missions for a BDS was to participate with the 'T-force', an ad hoc task force assembled for unique mis-



16th Ordnance Department Bomb Disposal Squad. Members include Captain Marshall T. Crow, Technical Sergeant William J. Henry, Staff Sergeant Royal A. Boyd, Jr., Sergeant Edward L. Moulton, Technicians Fifth Grade Henry W. Heffner, Onesime C. Lagasse, and Johnnie L. Segraves.

sions, these ad hoc were often used for certain assignments. The 16th BDS participated in the attack on Schwammenauel Dam with the 311th Infantry Regiment of the 78th Division on February 9, 1945. The role of the BDS was to inspect the dam for explosives once the infantry secured it. During the action, Captain Crow was wounded in the hand and leg and had to be evacuated. At one point Technical Sergeant Henry was driven back from his position, only to return with more support to capture the strong point. For their actions that day, Captain Crow received the Silver Star and Technical Sergeant Henry received the Bronze Star.¹⁶

By late March 1945, the attached personnel to the squad began to grow. Seven Belgian Soldiers had been attached to the squad by the end of March. At its height, the attached personnel included four officers and 116 enlisted men. At the end of the war, the 16th BDS, as a part of V Corps, was augmented by 135 citizens of Leipzig in ordnance clearing operations for the city. According to its unit history, by June 1, 1945, the squad completed 373 bomb and shell clearing incidents, and destroyed 1,167.5

tons of enemy ammunition and 91,701 tons of enemy weapons.¹⁷

By the end of the war, every enlisted man of the squad had earned the Bronze Star; two of them earned a second. Captain Crow had one Silver Star and one Bronze Star. All seven possessed 5 Service Stars (each one denoting a separate campaign) and a Bronze Arrowhead for the D-day landings (except one member who replaced one member detached in June 1944 for medical reasons).¹⁸

By the end of WWII, American BDS's had asserted their distinct identity based on their cumulative WWII experience. The Ordnance Department had rightly borrowed from the British to establish its own school and organization. However, as the war continued, the American experience based on offensive operations in Alaska, the Mediterranean, Italy, France, and Germany took the bomb disposal squads in a unique direction and created units which served a multiplicity of roles and functions to the combat soldier, often as close to the front lines as possible.🔴

— ENDNOTES —

1. Letter from the Commandant, Fourteenth Naval District to the Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance, dated January 1, 1942. Subject: Unexploded Japanese Bomb No. 1, Report On. Copy of letter maintained in the office of the Ordnance Corps historian historical files. Lieutenant Draper L. Kauffman became a pioneer in ordnance disposal in the US Navy and significantly influenced the development of the explosive ordnance disposal community in the Navy.
2. Unpublished manuscript. Hooper, Samuel J., Sergeant First Class. *The History of the U.S. Army Bomb Disposal and Explosive Ordnance Disposal: 1941-1980*. Manuscript is maintained in the office of the Ordnance Corps historian historical files. p. 1. In addition to this unpublished manuscript, there is a small collection of files maintained in the Ordnance Corps historian's office which relate to the origin and history of BDS's in World War II and thereafter.
3. Memorandum to Major Saholsky, Ordnance Department Bomb Disposal School, dated August 7, 1942. Subject: Courses Conducted at Ordnance bomb Disposal School. Copy of memo maintained in the office of the Ordnance Corps historian historical files.
4. Ibid.
5. Unpublished manuscript, Hooper. p. 8.
6. 5th Bomb Disposal Squad (Separate) unit history, author unknown. *History of the Fifth Ordnance Bomb Disposal Squad. (through) February 28, 1945*. This title is maintained in the office of the Ordnance Corps historian historical files. p. 1.
7. Ibid. p. 1.
8. Ibid. p. 2.
9. Ibid. p. 2.
10. Unpublished manuscript, Hooper. p. 17.
11. Todorovich, Steve, 1Lt, Third Platoon Commander, 235th Ordnance Department Bomb Disposal Company. *American bomb Disposal in the Sicilian Campaign: Third Platoon, 235 Ordnance Company, B.D.* Date unknown. This title is maintained in the office of the Ordnance Corps historian historical files. p.1.
12. Ibid. p. 1.
13. Ibid. p. 3
14. 16th Bomb Disposal Squad (Separate) unit history, author unknown. *Squad History: January 1944 to June 1945*. Date unknown. This title is maintained in the office of the Ordnance Corps historian historical files. p. 1.
15. Ibid. p. 2.
16. Ibid. p. 7.
17. Ibid. p. 8.
18. Ibid. p. 9.

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The US Army Ordnance Corps Association (OCA) is seeking applicants for their Association Director position. The qualified applicant must be a self-starter with strong written and verbal communications skills, as well as possess the ability to synchronize multiple tasks for this large private organization. The Association Director is a permanent position that manages the overall business property and programs of the association's day to day operations and works with the executive director and president to maximize support from private foundations and makes the case for support for various programs. The Association Director supervises all association employees and exercises hiring and firing authority on behalf of the Executive Director and the Executive Council. The Association Director is also authorized to employ other volunteer personnel as necessary to conduct normal business transactions of the gift shop and the association. The Association Director is responsible for the operation, management, advertising and merchandise selection for the gift shop, website, the association gift brochure, and the OCA's *Ordnance* magazine. The Association Director manages the implementation of all activities designed to support the organization and its programs, including: developing and expanding strategies for increasing funding; preparing timely and accurate reports of membership; organizing events; and building long-lasting partnerships; and tracking all OCA activity and deadlines.



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