



Bombs on our doorstep?

Barely a day goes by without reference to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) causing havoc to British Forces deployed overseas.

Yet, here on our doorstep, devices lie undiscovered in our fields, gardens, building sites and roadways, a legacy of our forefathers stemming predominantly from the Second World War.

Unexploded ordnance (UXO) is the generic term for bombs, bullets, shells, grenades and land mines that did not explode when they were employed, and still pose a risk of detonation. You may also hear reference to Munitions and Explosives of Concern.

Background

Headlines are plentiful concerning UXO; unexploded land mines and mortar bombs discovered in gardens, shells discovered by pigs, and mortar bombs discovered on beaches. The development at the Olympics site for 2012 has already been evacuated due to the discovery of an unexploded bomb just one metre inside the perimeter fence (the major traffic route for bulldozers, diggers and lorries).

UXO uncovered in Britain today largely stems from the Blitz which lasted from 7 September 1940 to 10 May 1941. During this time over one million incendiaries and around 50,000 High Explosive (HE) bombs were dropped on London. However, the Blitz was not confined to the capital and around 35,000 tonnes of HE bombs were dropped countrywide during the Blitz.

The area from Thurrock to Southend is today considered a high risk zone for unexploded bombs by risk mapping companies. Such companies, backed up by geophysics and risk assessment mapping provide assistance where needed, principally to builders, landowners and developers. Zones are assessed by the density of bombing hits – in a high risk area, this equates to 50+ bombs per 1,000 acres.

Some may have heard of the doodlebug rockets or V-1s employed by the Luftwaffe – an early version of the more modern cruise missile. The doodlebugs were air launched with approximately 1,200 launched between July 1944 and January 1945. The air-launching capability gave the Germans the opportunity to outflank the air defence systems employed in the capital. However, the doodlebugs did have a 40 per cent failure rate and air-launching exposed the bombers to the threat of fighter attack as the launch lit up the area around the aircraft for several seconds. These factors meant that often the rockets never quite made it to their target destination.

Further, it is worth noting that doodlebugs were predominantly produced in labour camps. Tampering with the fuses and guiding systems by the prisoners in the labour camps was not uncommon and served to dampen the overall effect of the doodlebug rockets. Perhaps ironically, this created many of the problems that we face from time to time today in relation to UXO.

briefing continued

What to do if you discover UXO

Confirm

If at all possible you should first confirm that there is UXO. If you can assess the dimensions of the UXO and perhaps draw a sketch enhanced by detailing any clear markings, this would assist bomb disposal personnel. However, extreme caution should be exercised and a telephone call to the police should be the next step. Be wary of using mobile telephones or radios to relay information; the device may still be live and highly volatile.

Clear

The area should be cleared (depending on the size of the device) out to a range of up to four hundred metres - again, caution is paramount. In clearing the area, this should include all houses, roads and gateways; alert locals with a sharp knock on the door and a quick brief.

Cordon

If you are in a position to do so, you should direct those around you to stop up gateways, entrances and exits and prevent access to the site of the UXO find. Minetape should not be necessary, and it should be noted that, if people choose to ignore your efforts, you cannot use force to impose your will.

Control

As the finder of the UXO, you are in control until the security forces arrive, be it the police or the Army. You should control access to the area and coordinate with the security forces.

Conclusion

The threat to life on discovering UXO is very real, and devices are being uncovered throughout our countryside more regularly than one might imagine. There are specialist companies who will deal with assessing land where devices have been uncovered, and these may be a valuable source of information to landowners and developers alike. Having said all this, an awareness of such devices may be all that is necessary!

Jonathan served with the Royal Regiment of Artillery in the British Army for six years, and served on operations overseas, including Iraq, where an awareness of improvised explosive devices and unexploded ordnance was fundamental to patrols on the streets of Basrah city and its northerly suburbs.



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