Come, friendly bombs...

CBRNe World takes an exclusive tour of the UK's Defence EOD School and examines the work being done there

CHATTENDEN, in Kent, is another one of those places in the UK (as elsewhere) that fell off the map; it exists, but only sort of. A single (unhelpful) roadsign to DEODS (Defence EOD School) provides a feeling of confidence but little direction – DEODS exists for those that need it to. DEODS is part of the Defence Explosives, Munitions and Search School (DEMSS), the other parts being the National Search Center (NSC), with which it is co-located, and the Army School of Ammunition (ASofA). The school is responsible for the training of the UK MoD's bomb disposal officers (BDOs) who deal with the various military ordnance – both modern and legacy – that are prevalent in operations.

The use of the word ordnance provides an important definition; the improvised explosive device (IED) threat is usually dealt with by the higher end 'Search' operatives in the UK. The School, however, deals with both conventional and non-conventional munitions and booby traps. The world of the BDO is a close knit one in the UK, as it is elsewhere, and the fact that the work of an EOD operative is no less dangerous than that of an IEDD officer was reinforced by the recent death of an old member of the school, while clearing legacy ordnance in Lebanon.

While the school has been the centre for dealing with ordnance disposal for many years, the impact of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has forced a return to an old branch of the curriculum – the disposal of chemical and biological munitions. This does require a change in the courses and a higher degree of understanding. Staff Sergeant Andy Stewart outlined the CB-EOD courses on offer. "There are a variety of courses," he said. "At the top there is the 0801, an advanced seven-week EOD course. Currently we are assessing a ten-week pilot, which would include more practical elements than it currently has. The 0801 has more difficult scenarios than the others, such as a CWA projectile stuck in a building that needs to be rendered safe, and we provide them with different equipment and training to do this. There is also the issue of dealing with leaks and packaging. Where a chemical mine, for example, might have been tampered with by a terrorist and now needs to be made safe, this would include sealing the leak and making it safe for removal. At the bottom there is the 0805 – a junior ranks course – which is an introductory course; it has two weeks of EOD and only one day of biological and chemical munitions. The 0804 is a more practical course, lasting four weeks and will do CB EOD practical tasks, such as calculating downwind hazard and dealing with leaks and packaging."

Changing gear

Our tour of the site coincided with some of the training for the students in CB EOD, and it was clear that there was a step change in understanding needed to be inculcated in the students. For example, students would confuse the safe distance for a chemical fill munition with that of traditional HE, or place munitions a safe distance from the road but not take notice of downwind hazard – which is characteristic of chemical fill. It is not a shortage of skill, but rather a gear change – a merging of the skills of the BDO and the CBRN officer. The School puts great faith in the talent of its operatives and relies on this to deal with scenarios in the field. Staff Sergeant Andy Stewart explained: "Our main role is to deal with the traditional types of munition, typically air-dropped munitions, which is the 'traditional' role of EOD where we render these safe and remove the fuse. We offer generic training which allows a greater understanding of incidents. So, instead of a list of instructions for set munitions and scenarios, we run off generics – so the operative has to develop flexibility to achieve his criteria. We put a lot of emphasis on the individual; that it is down to the BDO to drive that scenario.

"Chemical training has had to be developed from the threat that was posed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the BDOs need to be aware of their characteristics and effects. This means they do need a basic knowledge of CBRN, but these operatives will not be junior soldiers – they will be experienced, senior NCOs, etc."

While this sort of training might deliver more confident and flexible officers, it does rely on the highest calibre of staff to provide it – a wrong lead will only encourage potentially lethal bad habits. Staff Sergeant Stewart agreed that it was dependent on the quality of the staff, but that this had been realised a number of years ago. "As an instructor you are only given strategic direction; it is down to the instructor to develop his own lessons," he said. "We are the ones that have to make sure they are current and that the verisimilitude is there. These guys' lives depend on the instructors being good, so we have to have a large amount of experience – at least one BDO tour which has involved a range of scenarios and experiences."

The School itself is set in a large area of countryside in the east of England, allowing for traditional battlefield scenarios, but the school has also developed scenario-specific locations, as Staff Sergeant Stewart explained: "We offer varied training: we have tunnels, a urban site, an aircraft, a typical Bosnian site (with a Russian tank and road block), but these are all props towards the aim of getting the students' minds working. For example, if we put them in a closed pipe we want them thinking about things like secondary hazards; whether there is a chance of there being a secondary gas in there.

"We are increasing the number of advanced courses that we offer, and you can never do enough practical work. It has to be hands-on; simulation will never have the same attraction as it does in other fields as it does not promote the confidence you need as an EOD operative. In the future, as training becomes more advanced and skills more pronounced, we will see an increased appreciation of the EOD operative and recognise it as a trade."

Yet for all the good work that is done at the school, it could not be described as high tech. There had been a lot of 'on-off' speculation about the proposed merger of DEMSS at Bicester, this is now been confirmed by a Ministerial Statement. Until the move happens there appears to be a reluctance to invest any extra funds into Chattenden to modernise some of the facilities, Staff Sergeant Stewart insisted this was not a problem. "You can go to some US bases, for example, and you will see purpose-built areas and buildings – so they can recreate areas of Fallujah, for example. But will the battlefield always look like that? The enemy is not the clearest of people, and they do not plan where the battlefield will be in the same way that conventional forces might. We also cannot just focus on one scenario such as Iraq; we need to do many areas of threat – where terrorists might be looking next. One of the concerns is the amount of chemicals and fuel kept in naval dockyards, for example, so we are very keen to use the naval diving pool that we have here to develop skills that might also be called into play."

CBRN requires different skills to EOD
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The operatives are not provided with anything approaching the same degree of CWA/BWA detection equipment that specialist units are. The BDOs are trained on CAM, with LCAD soon to be included, and also utilise Argon Electronics' training devices. This isn't seen as a problem, however, as the roles of the BDO and CBRN Officer are drawing closer, and Staff Sergeant Stewart sketched out how he was preparing the new BDOs for this relationship. "We see ourselves working with units like the Joint CBRN Regiment more often, with them coming across a munition, DEODS trained individuals opening it and then them sampling it," he said. "We will also collaborate to do unexploded ordnance intelligence gathering and general close liaison."

Iraq and beyond

DEODS has not had the legacy of Northern Ireland to fall back on, since much of the IED work there went to 'Search' trained operatives; instead it has touchstones like Bosnia and Kosovo. Yet despite the media attention on IEDs in Iraq, a great deal of the work that DEODS trained operatives are doing in Iraq is equally dangerous and deserving of praise. "We get informed weekly with what is going on in Iraq, and we turn that back into training and scenarios – but we cannot get too focused on Iraq," said Staff Sergeant Stewart. "In terms of IEDs, we don't train our operatives to deal with those, but we do teach them to deal with booby traps. Admittedly this is a bit of a grey area – when is a booby trap not an IED? Our definition is that we deal with anything that uses military electronics and components, rather than chemical explosives and mobile phone technology, for example.

"In terms of whether this definition makes it easier for us, I'd argue that we have a harder job than many of the techs who just have to deal with IEDs. There are arms caches hidden throughout Iraq and that is our daily work – getting rid of that cache. These caches are unstable; you have no idea how long it has been there, the state of the munitions, how accessible they are. There is a huge risk to the individual and we have to put a greater emphasis on risk assessment – not only to ourselves but also to the surroundings, as we do not always know what the mix of munitions might be."

The decision not to focus on Iraq and the current situation seems, to me, to be the right one and the range of scenarios that we saw in a day – leaking chemical 'mine', airdropped conventional munition in a chemical environment, an attempt to turn a chemical fill shell into an IED, a CWA shell lodged in the roof of a building, etc – seem dedicated to testing the individual's ability to think first and use technical skills second. The merging of disciplines, both within EOD/IED and outside – such as CBRN – is going to require open minds that will take advantage of the opportunities rather than a close-minded, 'cap badge' mentality. The amount of operatives needed by operations will put pressure on the school, however; demand is outstripping supply, and the challenge for the school will be to ensure they can combine high throughput with high quality. The challenges involved in the re-grafting CWA/BWA to EOD would militate against a speedy resolution to this equation, but as long as the school can continue to have students who combine 'common sense', innovation and technical skills then the generic training offered will continue to pay dividends.