

Royal Navy EOD

by Commander Peter Greenwood RN, Commanding Officer Fleet Diving Squadron

I became a Mine Clearance Diving Officer in 1984, having completed what was then, and still is, one of the most physically and mentally demanding 12-month professional courses in the Royal Navy. During the past 20-something years I have held a number of posts, including being the Second in Command of a Frigate. However, it is during the past two years that I have been fortunate enough to have commanded the Royal Navy's Fleet Diving Squadron (FDS) where I have been able to see at first hand the level of professionalism and courage that Clearance Divers and RN personnel deliver on a daily basis. What I see in my Junior and Senior ranks and officers is an intelligent, determined and professional Squadron, able to respond to ever increasing operational tasking and yet still enjoy service life to the full.

The Fleet Diving Squadron consists of 157 Clearance Divers and 15 support staff, who are divided into three Diving Groups located in the Naval Bases of the UK. The Northern and Southern Diving Groups or the Area Clearance Diving Groups (ADGs) are commanded by Lieutenant Commanders, whilst I am fortunate to be dual-hatted as both the Commanding Officer of the Fleet Diving Squadron and the Fleet Diving Group. Each diving group is sub-divided into diving units that give responsibility to RN Lieutenants at an early stage of their career.

Our mission is to provide worldwide diving, in-water maintenance and repair (IWMAR), and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) to the Fleet. I'd like to explain what that means by taking a look at what the Diving Groups get up to in their day-to-day life.

The Northern Diving Group (NDG), based at HM Naval Base Clyde, consists of 45 clearance divers and engineers. Their area of responsibility is worldwide diving and underwater engineering support to submarines. They tend, though, to dive in the less glamorous waters of Faslane. Here, cold water and zero visibility are their normal operating environments whilst they ensure that submarines have all the diving and

engineering support that they need. NDG are also a key manpower provider in support of the NATO Submarine Rescue System, which is a tri-nation programme supported by the UK, Norway and France, and operated by Rolls Royce in Faslane. This enables a full rescue mission of a distressed submarine using a submersible. The submersible mates with the submarine and then transfers the crew into a complex series of recompression chambers, which NDG divers operate, to ensure that the submariners are slowly decompressed to avoid serious injury.

The Southern Diving Group (SDG) has a diving unit in both Devonport and Portsmouth. These units have 28 and 22 clearance divers respectively and their core diving is in support of aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, destroyers and frigates. They also provide maritime EOD force protection teams, capable of deploying in support of Fleet units. They conduct underwater searches of ships,

rescue diving throughout the UK. The groups are at immediate notice 24/7 to respond to any EOD or diving task.

At the end of the Second World War over 100,000 mines were unaccounted for. Because the explosives can crystallise over a long period of time, they remain ever-volatile and could still sink a fishing vessel. To educate fishing communities, the diving groups give presentations on the dangers that still remain in UK waters, and during 2008 over 20 fishing vessels found mines or torpedoes in their nets. These mines also pose a significant hazard to pipe laying or when found on beaches and have to be disposed of without threatening the local population.

During 2008, 458 EOD incidents were attended by RN EOD Teams, which led to the safe disposal of 757 items of explosive-ordnance. 2008 was a relatively quiet year for IED call-outs, with the teams responding to only 13.



Basra, ordnance being prepared for demolition

jetties and the immediate area for underwater explosives, limpet mines or improvised explosive devices (IED's) and destroy them. To ensure our ships are prepared for these forms of attacks, the diving units conduct regular training onboard HM Ships.

Explosive Ordnance Disposal

Both diving groups provide Military Aid to the Civil Powers. This includes conventional munitions disposal (including Second World War ordnance) as well as IED disposal and search and

So far, during 2009, the groups have responded to 261 tasks, but 21 of these have been IEDs, a large increase from last year. During the spring and summer the ADG deploy to former beach test ranges in the Gower, Pendine, Stranraer, Borth and Eskmeals. Teams will routinely collect a large stockpile of old shells and explosives that have been there since before the Second World War. Although these items have been on the seabed for about 70 years, they are still treated with great respect. There remains one live

range that needs clearing on a bi-annual basis, off Garvie Island near Cape Wrath, which is used as a military bombing range. The teams will dispose of upwards of 50 unexploded bombs and shells that may have been washed up. Whilst there, the team takes part in the Cape Wrath Highland Games, representing the Royal Navy in the tug-of-war. The locals relish the competition and now and again win.

One of their most time-consuming tasks is the disposal of time-expired pyrotechnics collected from yachts and fishing vessels on behalf of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. The ADG travels the length and breadth of the UK to collect these from Coast Guard and police stations. As a consequence, they have established close bonds with the community and give safety briefs to locals and users of pyrotechnics. In 2008 the Area Groups disposed of over 18,000 pyrotechnics, which may otherwise have posed a threat.

The final area of responsibility for the ADG is diving search and rescue, and every effort is made to support these operations. The largest recent activation was on 12 April 2007, with *MV Bourbon Dolphin*, an oil-rig support vessel which had capsized 80 miles off the Shetland Islands. Of the vessel's crew, three were dead and five unaccounted for. The four-man NDG team conducted numerous dives in challenging conditions, penetrating the ship to search for survivors. Unfortunately, there was no sign of life and the unaccounted crew were presumed lost. Shortly after the last diver was recovered, the ship sank in over a 100 meters. In recognition of their bravery, one team member was awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal and two received the Queen's Commendation for brave conduct.

The Orkney Islands are an area of particular responsibility for NDG. They regularly visit the Islands on duty, and have a long-standing commitment to the memorial of HMS ROYAL OAK, made a War Grave in 1939. Since the end of the Second World War, RN Divers have supported the annual Remembrance

Ceremony when they change the ship's ensign, which she continually flies underwater. Each year the old ensign is presented to the Royal Oak Association. Sadly, as time goes on, a key part of our duty is to place the ashes of survivors back within the ship so that they can rest in peace with their departed shipmates. This is carried out with all the honour and pride of the Royal Navy and is hugely appreciated by the local community and the families of the departed. The ship's bell was recovered by Navy Divers and is now in St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall.

Moving on to the Fleet Diving Group, which is deployable world wide and consists of three separate units, each commanded by an RN Lieutenant and based at the Fleet Diving Squadron Headquarters, Horsea Island, Portsmouth.



The current Herrick 11 RN EOD team in Afghanistan. Left to right: Diver Cockerton, Leading Diver Higgins, Petty Officer (Diver) Gardner and Diver Collins

Fleet Diving Unit 2 (FDU2) is a 14-man unit responsible for Very Shallow Water Mine-Counter-measures and Mine Investigation and Exploitation operations in support of the UK and NATO. They operate the REMUS Autonomous Underwater Vehicle, which is a small man-portable vehicle with a side-scan sonar that is used to search large areas of the seabed, ports, harbours or coastal waters. They dive using sophisticated non-magnetic and acoustically quiet rebreather systems and are equipped with specialist diver underwater navigation and sonar. Working with 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines, their primary task is to give an amphibious task force commander advance intelligence of beach conditions, suitability for landing

craft and whether the beach has been mined by the enemy. The team can locate mines and prepare them for destruction as the assault force approaches the beach.

FDU2 regularly exercise this capability in all areas of the world ranging from the heat of the Persian Gulf during Gulf War 2 to the icy waters of Norway during Exercise Cold Response. The unit has recently returned from the final phase of the TAURUS 09 Amphibious Task Group Deployment where they conducted land EOD operations during Exercise Commando Rajah in the jungles of Brunei in support of the Royal Gurkha Rifles. FDU2 are currently on-call as part of the Joint Rapid Reaction Force in support of deployed MCM forces in the Persian Gulf.

FDU 3 were, until recently, the Mine Exploitation unit. However, over the past two and a half years, RN Clearance

Divers have deployed in support of land-based EOD operations in support of OP TELIC, forming Conventional Munitions Disposal Teams within the Joint Service EOD Group in Basra. This involved disposing of large numbers of explosives that were littered around the country, from the Iran/Iraq war and Gulf Wars 1 and 2. This was vital, as the militia and Taliban exploited these weapons to form IEDs against UK troops. As the threat in Afghanistan began to increase, this resulted in a requirement for additional

EOD forces and a Counter IEDD Task Group was formed. In October 2009 the first RN EOD team will deploy to Afghanistan in support of Op HERRICK. The team lead by PO(D) (Digger) Gardner and three clearance divers will be embedded into the Royal Engineer Field Squadron.

Having been in command of FDS for the past two years, I am extremely proud to have seen how much such a small cadre of specialist divers can deliver on a daily basis whilst always displaying considerable professionalism and, more importantly, pride in all that they do. I believe that a true military ethos is firmly embedded in the daily lives of members of the Clearance Diving Branch and of the Fleet Diving Squadron.