

Sapper Support

An Army Contribution to RAF Jointery

by Lieutenant Colonel

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39 Engineer Regiment

The past 18 months have seen a significant change in the Army's support to RAF operations, particularly in the Middle East. Since Suez, Sapper support to RAF operations has been focused on post attack repair and maintenance of Main Operating Bases (MOBs). The Regiment's first tour in the Army was devoted to post attack repair of RAF Laarbruch and concluded with 'real' post attack repair and runway upgrading of Port Stanley airfield in the Falklands). With the arrival of the JRDF era, the focus of Sapper support switched from 'after the event' activity to 'pre-cursor' work. No longer are Air Support Sappers epitomised by huge earthmoving machines predeployed on airfields alongside vast stockpiles of materiel.

The capability remains to repair attacked airfields and many RAF flying stations play host to Territorial Army Royal Engineer squadrons who continue to hold the equipment and practise the critical post attack capability of airfield damage repair. But for the lead elements, the priorities have changed.

The critical prerequisite of air superiority for successful operations has been recognised since General Jan Smuts' report in 1917 (and, by its proponents, earlier still). In all the UK's recent high intensity conflicts, it has been air power that has been first into action and it is no surprise that air assets comprise a disproportionately large component of JRDF highest readiness forces. In support of this, 39 Engineer Regiment, the Regular Army's Sapper regiment providing RE support to air operations, is the only LAND major unit to maintain one sub unit permanently at Readiness State 1/2 (R1/2) with the rest of the Regiment at R3. Its function is to provide the 'get you in capability' on a Deployed Operating Base (DOB).

Over the past 18 months, the Regiment has been developing its doctrine, its equipment and its procedures through staff exercises (Ex CROWN EAGLE), MAXEVALS/TACEVALS (Ex BRILLIANT FOIL) and real operations (Op BOLTON) to meet the requirement to enable air operations from DOBs in the shortest possible time. Now widely accepted in the RAF as 'another essential SLSU', the Sappers' initial remit is to provide the infrastructure engineering to allow all the other critical cogs on a DOB to turn smoothly: aircraft beddown, including operating surfaces and environmental protection; utilities for engineering support; ammunition and armaments facilities for storage and preparation; fuels storage and distribution; and personnel beddown both in terms of C2 and living

environments. To deliver this capability, the standard STC LSC DOAST includes a 3 man recce team on the initial deployment to cover the 3 critical components of sapper work: command, technical expertise and resources specialisation. Close behind the recce team in the initial deployment comes the RE DOB activation party which requires the lift of just 3 C130s to move men and vehicles. This was validated on a recent exercise to evaluate the fitness for role of 53 Fd Sqn (Air Sp) coming up to R1/2 status. The activation team, with vehicles and plant flew from Lyneham to Waterbeach, which is used by the Sappers as a Bare DOB. The activation team initiates the preparatory work for full flying operations and the concept was successfully employed on Op BOLTON when a reinforced activation team undertook all the works for Initial Operating Capability on what was, in most respects, a Well Found base. The degree of subsequent lift required to commence operations from an Austere or Bare DOB is dependant on the work required on the airfield and assets available locally but equipment needed, up to and including an ADR capability (albeit not to STANAG 2927 standards), is now deployable by C130.

The critical factors in base developments are time and resources but these tend to be 'hidden' during peacetime exercises. Peacetime accounting and exercise planning require all resources to be identified and provisioned well in advance so that 'exercise play' can take place unhindered. For Sapper works in particular, where resources such as construction materiel are often either not NATO stock numbered, not stored on the shelf in depots not transportable by air but require local sourcing, the importance of having a resources specialist with contracting authority on the ground early cannot be overstated. The lead time for provision of locally sourced materiel will often lie on the critical path as was clearly demonstrated on Op BOLTON. This is but one aspect of the time dimension.

Sapper works even under operational conditions are frequently measured in days rather than hours: a works table developed from a recent NATO COP recce estimated the time to full operational capability as 16-20 weeks, due largely to the earthworks associated with requisite protection measures. On exercises, this sort of lead time is concealed by the prior deployment of RE assets: for the NATO TACEVAL, Ex BRILLIANT FOIL, the scenario used was one of humanitarian assistance to explain the presence of RE assets in theatre (and works completed) prior to the start of SLSU deployments as work for an initial operating capability could not be completed within the time scale for other SLSUs. Not only does this risk distorting 'real' deployment programming but it also unrealistically oils the 'friction of war' in which it is envisaged that, on an Austere or Bare DOB, concurrent activity would be required in constructing, fitting out and simultaneously trying to use facilities such as Squadron Operating Facilities and engineering lines.

These are challenges that operational planners need to be aware of and exercise planners are addressing with each successive exercise. The important thing is that the system is being evaluated, successfully, with the BRILLIANT series of exercises at St Mawgan and passed the test of Op BOLTON. After the success of Ex CROWN EAGLE in 1996 and 1997 and Ex BRILLIANT FOIL 97, 39 Engr Regt has taken a more integrated part in station work up training and seeks to continue this into the future as preparing for deployed operations takes a larger place in RAF training. As Gp Capt Doggett said last October on Ex CROWN EAGLE: "I've done this the wrong way round: for real in the Gulf War, as a MAXEVAL in St Mawgan earlier this year and now as a study exercise". We are getting better. The base commander who deployed at the outset of Op BOLTON studied the topic on last year's Ex CROWN EAGLE where he just happened to have as a member of his syndicate the Sapper squadron commander who deployed to Ali Al Salem: therein lies the basis of true teamwork!

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