



# AN INSIGHT INTO UK EOD & SEARCH OPERATIONS IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING THREAT LANDSCAPE

*With insights from*

Colonel Zac Scott, Head of the British Army's Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Search Branch (DEODS)

Defence **iQ**



Ahead of his participation in the Countering Explosive Threat and Demining Conference, we spoke to **Colonel Zac Scott, Head of the British Army's Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Search Branch (DEODS)** to discuss the work of UK EOD & Search since withdrawing from Afghanistan, and how the relationship between the military EOD & Search and civilian EOD agencies is evolving the face of a persistent explosive threat.

### **Can you provide a brief overview of UK EOD & Search's role post-Herrick?**

The nature and level of our operational commitment has changed, but our philosophy and principles have not. They are based on nearly 50 years of operational experience and, whilst they have evolved and are subject to constant review, they have largely stood the test of time. Our EOD&S operators are still trained to the very highest standards and consistently demonstrate the capacity to respond to emerging threats at home and overseas. We must exercise how to apply our procedures in a range of different environments and we must remain current with changes in technology to understand how to keep our specialism relevant and effective.

The reduction in active operational commitments in Afghanistan has created freedom to train against other types of threats. For example, we are experimenting with the configuration of EOD&S teams for war fighting operations against a peer or near-peer enemy. This includes the way that we might operate in a dispersed manner, retaining the ability to concentrate forces and deliver the type of full-spectrum EOD&S effect that we routinely delivered on Op HERRICK. I am confident that the draw down from Op HERRICK does not require a fundamental change in the way that we do our business.

training and development – it is the basis of our world-leading reputation. We also have EOD&S personnel held at readiness for Contingent operations overseas.

Establishing the right risk appetite for contingent operations is a challenge and is only achievable by initially training to the UK MACA mission, which demands the very highest level of assurance. It is difficult to predict the nature of the challenge that will emerge, but I am confident that we can adapt.

For example, the response to the Skripal incident in Salisbury was based around specialist military CBRN-E experts working alongside scientific support from the Defence science and technology laboratory (DSTL). Although there were no explosive components, the operation demonstrates our soldiers' high level of Knowledge Skills and Experience (KSE), and the flexibility with which they are required to operate.





**What is the nature of the relationship between military EOD& Search capabilities and civilian EOD agencies? Does this extend to NGOs? Or is there a plan to more closely integrate with these organisations in the future?**

There is a good relationship and I hope that we can build on the current foundations. We must acknowledge that Military and Civilian EOD operators have different roles. The missions and tasks that they are each given will depend on what their tasking authority is trying to achieve within a theatre of operations. There will be areas of overlap - for example, we may encounter IEDs with similar construction and emplacement characteristics - but it is likely that we will be operating under different freedoms and constraints.

We are aware that many military EOD personnel move to the civilian or commercial sector when they leave the Service - indeed, many of us have friends working for OGDs or private companies - and we are fighting a common battle against the threat from IEDs. Our interests will not always align, but we should make the most of scarce resources and pull together where it is appropriate. I suspect that one of the key enablers to forming a strong relationship between military and civilian efforts is establishing a common language for understanding each other's capabilities. I think that our work with the United Nations, defining common standards for EOD operators (whether military or civilian), goes some way to bridging the gap.

Our recent experience in Iraq (in Ramadi and in Mosul) has demonstrated that blended solutions could be increasingly common - and we are probably nearer the beginning of that journey than we are the end. Our initiatives here should be consistent with the wider Army Whole Force Approach and existing schemes such as Industry



Placement might offer a model for future collaboration, but EOD offers unique challenges and these will take time to work through.

**What is the relationship between the military EOD& Search capabilities and civilian EOD agencies in terms of information sharing?**

It is important that the military maximises its understanding of potential threats. Our response to those threats may require us to work with international and / or commercial partners - indeed, interoperability with our NATO partners is a key driver for the Army (not just EOD specialists). Commercial experience is one source of understanding the threat. In Iraq, we worked hard to declassify threat material quickly to be able to share it with the commercial sector and I would hope that there would be a similar flow of information where commercial agencies or NGOs have greater exposure.



Sharing technical information is not necessarily intelligence, but it does contribute to shared understanding. For example, there is benefit to sharing knowledge about where and when we are delivering Counter-IED effect, particularly where there are several agencies operating in one area. If we can build a common picture and pull in the same direction, we can deliver efficiencies and ensure that we make best use of EOD and search assets.

### **What is the focus when looking to prepare short-term training teams and similar support for overseas EOD partners?**

The focus is always on understanding the needs of the supported partner or partner nation. We can provide a range of options, including delivery of a mixed military-civil (commercial) solution. Staff in Army Headquarters are pursuing an innovative option to coordinate such opportunities and I am hopeful that the Counter-Explosive Ordnance Defence Engagement (CEDE) office will prosper, drawing on our relationship with Counter-IED UK [the Aerospace Defence Security (ADS) Special Interest Group (SIG)].

### **How is the British Army ensuring skill retention in EOD?**

Our plans for skill retention in EOD must be seen within the wider context of the Army's recruitment and retention strategy. We do not view industry as part of this challenge, but rather acknowledge that people may go on to use the high degree of skills acquired during their service in the commercial sector.

The nature of the military offer is evolving, but it is still a compelling package and EOD continues to offer a highly rewarding career path for those that have potential and application to succeed. The Royal Engineers have formally established a trade group for EOD & Search, bringing greater coherence to career development and closer aligning with existing structures for EOD in the Royal Logistic Corps' Ammunition Technical Trade. We are grateful to the AFPRB for their continued support for Recruiting and Retention Pay (RRP) for EOD, which recognises the challenges and pressures that face EOD operators in all three Services.



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## **Global Crisis. Global Response.**

Led by senior policy drivers from government, NGO's and military and supported by industry leaders across all three pillars of EOD – prepare the force, attack the network and defeat the device – the conference will outline the new, joint approach to countering the explosive threat.

Want to find out more? Download the event agenda [\*\*here\*\*](#)