



A controlled detonation set off by Soldiers from the 725th Explosive Ordnance Disposal Team, 441st EOD Battalion, Task Force Troy and Iraqi soldiers with Iraqi Bomb Disposal Company, 9th Army Disposal to destroy unexploded ordnance July 13, 2010 outside Bassami, Iraq.

Photo by Pfc. Gary Silverman

ARMY BOMB

SQUADS

BY SHEJAL PULIVARTI

The phone rings. The training halts in anticipation. The NCO in charge, a seasoned team leader, gives the other two members of the team the signal to gear up. Within moments the three-person team is en route. Adrenaline pumping, they prep for whatever could be awaiting them on the ground — the unknown ordnance they are called to safely defuse and dispose of in an effort to protect personnel and property.

This special breed of Soldiers, the Army Bomb Squad, is responsible for the identification, render safe and disposal of any hazardous unexploded munitions.

These Soldiers, in a career field that takes exceptional willpower and technical proficiency — Explosive Ordnance Disposal — see themselves as average people doing not-so-

average work.

The demand for what they do has grown consistently, and the three-person teams, which augment larger units when deployed, have been indispensable in the past 10 years of conflict. Their operational tempo is steadfast even in-garrison, however.

EOD ELIGIBLE

Bomb techs have to volunteer for the job. “If at any time any of the guys don’t want to be a bomb tech anymore, they pull their volunteer statement,” said Staff Sgt. Brian Holmes, EOD team leader for the 745th EOD Company, 63rd EOD Battalion, 52nd Ordnance Group, stationed at Fort Drum, N.Y.

EOD Soldiers must undergo an extensive vetting process. Within their packets, they must submit volunteer statements.

“It takes someone who is adaptive, very creative in the way they think. It takes a resilient Soldier who is incredibly open-minded. Every incident is different; they have to be able to look at the situation on an individual basis and through every point of view,” said Sgt. Maj. Ruben Stoeltje, a veteran EOD professional who is now an instructor for the Sergeants Major Course at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas.

TRAINING

The EOD qualifying program is a three-step process. Upon submitting request packets and successfully completing the screening process, Soldiers attend a 10-week course at Fort Lee, Va. Although it’s technically phase one of their training, the Army also uses it as a pre-course to ensure applicants meet all the prerequisites of the career field.

Qualified candidates then report to Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., for an intense 28-week joint service course at the Naval School of Explosive Ordnance Disposal. All military service members, as well as local, state and federal law enforcement, attend this training as one team.

“The course is developed to put a lot of stress on them,” Stoeltje said. “There is a lot of information, and it shows us how they would react in a real-life situation.”

The course is split into nine training divisions. “We learn so much during the training, the basics of a lot of things,” Holmes said. “The foundation is learning how to use all the tools; we have a lot of specialized tools.”

Once successfully completing the training at Eglin, Soldiers return to Fort Lee for a month to cover Army-specific equipment. “We all (various EOD elements) use more or less the same equipment, but we allow the Soldiers to get more time handling the Army equipment during this time,” said Stoeltje, who recently served as the senior enlisted advisor for Army EOD training at Fort Lee.

The EOD recruit is then qualified as an Army bomb tech and awarded the 89D Military Occupation Specialty. He or she is obligated to serve two years in the Army.

EOD STRUCTURE

Unlike most other jobs in the Army, all EOD personnel fall under one umbrella—The 20th Support Command, the Army’s chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and high-yield explosives headquarters at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md. EOD is then broken down into two groups, the 52nd and 71st Ordnance Groups.

Battalions and companies from each group are strategically located throughout the Army. Regardless of geographical location, all EOD Soldiers wear the patch of

EOD REQUIREMENTS

Interested Soldiers and NCOs must:

- Be a private first class through sergeant (sergeant non-promotable with less than one year time in grade)
- Have at least two years of active-duty service
- Have a General Maintenance Score (MAINT on your Enlisted Record Brief) of at least 104
- Be a U.S. citizen
- Be eligible for top secret clearance
- Have normal color vision; can’t be color blind
- Have a valid state driver’s license
- Not be allergic to explosives
- Have a physical profile serial code (PULHES) of at least 111121
- Successfully complete interview process
- Volunteer for the EOD program and sign an EOD volunteer statement
- Successfully perform a military-oriented protective posture and bomb suit performance test



An EOD team assigned to the 745th EOD Company, 63rd EOD Battalion, 52nd Ordnance Group, operates a robot to recon a mock improvised explosive device planted for training purposes Aug. 12 at Fort Drum, N.Y.

Photo by Shejal Pulivarti



Photo by Shejal Pulivarti

Staff Sgt. Brian Holmes, EOD team leader for the 745th EOD Company, 63rd EOD Battalion, 52nd Ordnance Group, is assisted into his bomb suit by his team members during a training exercise Aug. 12 at Fort Drum, N.Y.

the group they are assigned because they have a collective mission: support combatant commanders and government agencies to counter CBRNE and weapons of mass destruction threats.

In the EOD realm, three is the magic number. Each company has three platoons, each consisting of three teams. The teams are made up of three EOD personnel: One team leader — a team leader-certified staff sergeant — and two team members, both sergeants or below.

“We are able to fill every role. The team members, they switch positions between operating the robot and driving the truck. So all three of us can do everything,” Holmes said. “It’s my job as the team leader to teach. My guys get to run the robots, build the explosive charge and drive — all the fun stuff.”

The team leader also dons the bomb suit when deemed necessary. “The team leader is the first guy out of the truck and is responsible to keep them in a safe position. If we can’t do it by remote means, someone has to walk up to it. That’s my job, and it’s the only exciting part for me,” Holmes said.

HONING THE SKILL

Though the line in the NCO Creed, “I will strive to remain technically and tactically proficient” is applicable to all NCOs, Holmes said it’s even more important for EOD NCOs to apply it

every day.

“When we aren’t responding to a call, we are training,” he said. “We have to refresh skills; we have a pretty large skill set, and they are perishable, so we are constantly training.”

EOD units practice and sharpen their skills through mock incidents.

“We put a training aid Improvised Explosive Device out and have the guys in the truck run the robot and practice using the equipment in the confined space,” Holmes said. “All my guys are pretty well-trained and are some of the smartest guys I’ve met. But we still continue to train when we can.”

To be a team leader, EOD NCOs must undergo the team leader certification process.

“It covers everything you learned through the year’s worth of school, and you have to show you are competent in those tasks and are able to direct people,” Holmes said.

For now, a sergeant first class is able to certify more junior NCOs with the battalion commander’s approval. However, the EOD branch is looking to consolidate the qualification process and certification tasks by holding quarterly team leader certification academies at several locations. The consolidation will not only further legitimize the certification process but will also allow the potential team leaders to interact and learn from each other, Stoeltje said.



Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jon Soucy

Sgt. Christine Cammarota of the 731st Explosive Ordnance Disposal Company lays out ordnance to be destroyed during a combined operation with the 6th Iraqi Army Division's Bomb Disposal Company on April 11 in Baghdad, Iraq. The two units worked as partners to destroy ordnance collected to protect personnel and property.

MISSION SET

The EOD is a branch with an unwavering mission, both in-theater and in-garrison. When deployed, EOD Soldiers augment a larger unit and support their EOD needs. When back at home station, the units rotate through a response duty cycle to support local, state and federal law enforcement, including the Secret Service and the State Department.

“It’s pretty much the same whether we are deployed or not. In the states, we support civilian law enforcement agencies with military ordnance,” Holmes said.

“We also have a mission with the Secret Service to protect — we do bomb sweeps for foreign dignitaries and anybody in the State Department. We also support the president and all the way down when requested.”

Differences between mission sets mean they have to adjust constantly. The dynamic teams have to think even further out of the box when stateside and responding to a call. The options available overseas in a deployment setting are not practical at home.

“Our best case scenario, most times, is to blow the ordnance in place. For peacetime missions, that is just not an option. So we have to train our younger guys to respond in a different way since that’s not an option in downtown San Antonio,” Stoeltje said. “There have been times we responded to munitions stuck in a tree; there’s no procedure for that, but they thought outside

the box and figured it out. That’s what it takes to be successful in EOD.”

These dynamic teams not only have to sustain their technical proficiency, but also their creativity. Complacency is an EOD Soldier’s worst enemy.

There is a saying in the EOD profession: The first time you think you know what you have before going downrange, it is time for you to get out of EOD.

Stoeltje recalls an experience early in his EOD career while stationed at Fort Sill, Okla., that reminds him to keep an impartial perspective in his line of work.

“We responded to three IEDs, and they weren’t real — they were missing something. We got a call on a fourth one and were asked to respond by the local law enforcement. It was 10 o’clock on a Friday night, we had to go out and respond to this incident, and I’m thinking, ‘It’s not real because the other three weren’t real.’ We responded, and my team leader took care of it. Once he was done, he brought me downrange and showed me that it was real. ... It was an eye-opener.

“That is what made me promise to myself that I would never think I know what we have. If I had been the team leader, I would have made a mistake, and it would have cost me my life or worse, someone else’s life.”

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EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE

DISPOSAL BADGE

Commonly known as the “crab,” the EOD Badge is awarded after successfully completing the 38-week course at the Naval School of Explosive Ordnance Disposal conducted at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. The EOD Badge is one of the only joint service badges. There are three skill levels of the badge:



Basic — issued upon completion of training and between 18 and 24 months of being in the career field



Senior — earned after 3-5 years as an EOD specialist



Master — awarded after 7-15 years of service in a senior supervisory position

- **The Wreath** — Symbolic of the achievements and laurels gained minimizing accident potentials through the ingenuity and devotion to duty of its members. It is in memory of those EOD personnel who gave their lives while performing EOD duties.
- **The Bomb** — Copied from the design of the World War II Bomb Disposal Badge, the bomb represents the historic and major objective of the EOD attack, the unexploded bomb. The three fins represent the major areas of nuclear, conventional, and chemical and biological interest.
- **Lightning Bolts** — Symbolize the potential destructive power of the bomb and the courage and professionalism of EOD personnel in their endeavors to reduce hazards, as well as to render explosive ordnance harmless.
- **The Shield** — Represents the EOD mission: to protect personnel and property.



Photo by Pvt. Jarrett M. Branch

Sgt. Tyler Cole, a team member with the 53rd Ordnance Company, 3rd Explosive Ordnance Disposal Battalion, heads toward simulated explosive ordnance during a team leader certification June 23, 2009, at Yakima Training Center in Yakima, Wash. This is one of the 12 lanes that the EOD techs participated in during their certification.

NAVAL SCHOOL OF EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE DISPOSAL TRAINING

EOD School at Eglin Air Force Base is an intense 28-week course, divided into nine divisions:

- **Core Division** — learn fundamental knowledge, explosives and explosive effects and applied physical principles
- **Air Ordnance Division** — trained on processes and procedures to deal with various aircraft explosive munitions: bombs, bomb fuses, dispensers, payloads and guided missiles
- **Demolition Division** — trained on explosive safety and techniques to destroy explosives and explosive devices
- **Underwater Ordnance Division** — learn to identify, render safe and dispose of mines, torpedoes and any other underwater devices
- **Tools and Methods Division** — learn various EOD tools and techniques to locate and render safe ordnance
- **Improvised Explosive Devices** — taught various techniques to handle improvised and clandestine explosive devices, identification and disablements of components
- **Biological/Chemical Division** — trained on knowledge and skills required to identify and deal with chemical and biological weapons and agents
- **Nuclear Ordnance Division** — studying various aspects of nuclear physics, weapon designs and effects, and proper response procedure: contamination detection, personnel protection and contamination control
- **Ground Ordnance Division** — learn processes to handle projectiles, rockets, landmines and grenades; both U.S. and foreign.