

CHAPTER 34

FINAL SITE CLEARANCE

No`s 94 and 95 Maintenance Unit, RAF Ridgewell.

After the USAAF pulled out of Bures on 9th November 1945, the RAF had the unenviable task of clearing up all the munitions left scattered around the countryside.

These RAF Maintenance Units (MU`s) were similarly involved with the clearance of the other East Anglian bomb storage sites at Earsham and Barnham.

Although the war had ended, bombs were still in place some three years later in 1948. Regular RAF jeep patrols were dispatched to the FAD to check on the status of these surplus munitions. The RAF's No. 95MU based at Ridgewell was additionally tasked with clearing the abandoned ordnance around the local countryside. The recovered munitions were eventually transported back to Ridgewell Airfield for temporary storage.

RAF Ridgewell was used by both the 94th and 95th MU, from 15 July 1945 to 31 March 1957.

When the clearance work was complete, the RAF vacated the airfield.

With the end of military control, the majority of the airfield was returned to agriculture; the MOD retained the hangars as an extra storage facility for the USAAF at Wethersfield and Alconbury until the early 1990s.

Ref:- The American Air Museum, Duxford

The RAF considered three options of how to dispose of the volumes of the larger type bombs.

First, to return surplus munitions to ordnance factories for boiling out.

Second, to demolish them locally on disused bombing ranges.

Thirdly, to load them onto ships to be dropped into deep water.

The last option was considered the best choice, considering the proximity to a coastal port such as Harwich.

There is evidence that Gt Yeldham Station, was the departure point for these surplus bombs. Consequently, they were taken from Ridgewell to Gt Yeldham for onward rail delivery to Harwich Docks. Cargo Ships were modified to carry this kind of load, eventually sinking 42 kilotons of weapons in the waters of the Hebrides and beyond into the Continental shelf. Between 1945 and 1976, the MOD dropped about 1 million tons of munitions into Beaufort's Dyke, to the west of Scotland making it by far the largest known British military dump.

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In 1995, more than 4500 incendiary bombs from the Second World War have washed up on beaches around the west coast of Scotland. They are made of phosphorus, benzene and cellulose, these were known as Pyrophoric chemicals and were designed to ignite on contact with air.

During that year, a four-year-old boy received burns when he picked up a weapon containing phosphorous that washed up near Campbelltown, one of the Western Isles.

This implication, not yet confirmed by the MoD, is that the bombs had been sent for dumping in Beaufort's Dyke, an underwater trench 50 kilometres long, 5 kilometres wide and about 250 metres deep, which runs within 10 kilometres of the Scottish coast.

According to a letter sent by the MoD in June to researchers at the University of Liverpool, the MoD dispatched vast amounts of old weapons into this trench. The ministry dumped some 14,500 tons of 5-inch artillery rockets filled with poisonous phosgene gas

in the trench between July and October 1945. Over the following three years up to 1948, it consigned 135,000 tons of conventional munitions into the trench.

Sometimes the vessels made no attempt to reach the dyke, they dumped their bombs overboard into shallower waters instead, to save time, fuel and generate more profit.

Detailed ships records were often destroyed at the time, to evade scrutiny.

Extending the date to 1976, the MOD dropped about 1 million tons of munitions into and around the trench, making it by far the largest known UK Military Dump.