

# No room for error!

Service in the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit is not for the faint hearted.

CAPT. JEFFREY CURMI

**E**xplosive ordnance disposal is about the detection, evaluation, rendering safe, recovery and disposal of bombs. Based at Manoel Island, the AFM's Explosive Ordnance Disposal Troop consists of one officer and 30 men.

Tonnes of aerial bombs were dropped on the Maltese Islands during the last war. A relatively large number did not go off and continue to be unearthed to this day. The main reason for their failure was usually the fusing mechanism. German electric fuses were quite complex for their time, and prone to failure. Sixty years on, such bombs remain dangerous.

Over the past four years, the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit was called out 140 times to investigate suspected unexploded ordnance, including air-delivered bombs ranging from 2 kgs to 500 kgs, mortar rounds, grenades and shells of various types and calibre. There were instances where more than one item was recovered in a single operation. Some ordnance was recovered from the seabed during dredging operations or else ended up caught in fishermen's nets.

Explosive ordnance disposal operators are also called in to deal with explosions at firework factories. Their task is to make the sites safe by removing any unexploded petards or explosive material. This is no easy task particularly if the ordnance had been close to a fire doused with water.

Members of the EOD Troop are also trained to handle improvised explosive devices such as modern terrorist bombs in their various guises. Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD) is complicated and includes rendering safe bombs, whether placed in parcels, letters, cans or cars. This is a completely different skill



A bomb disposal robot.



Photographs by Darrin Zammit Lupi

compared to explosive ordnance disposal, requiring different procedures, equipment and training.

Whereas the explosive ordnance disposal officer has relatively enough time to think and study the ordnance, in improvised explosive device disposal, the operator is required to take quick, effective decisions that leave no room for error. This is where the fiction film stuff of choosing the right wire to cut to disable a time bomb could come true.

Luckily, the unit is equipped with two Explosive Ordnance Disposal Vehicles – robots that can be remotely used to disable a bomb from a safe distance.

Nicknamed Bertu, the first robot was purchased by the Armed Forces of Malta in 1989. Last year, another robot featuring the latest technology was bought. Over the past four years, this unit has had to deal with and safely disable 19 improvised explosive devices.

Underwater diving is another task undertaken by the troop, with the main focus being the detection and disposal of unexploded bombs on the seabed. Members of the unit also undertake security searches under water and alongside quays where selected warships and cruise liners are assigned a berth. The divers also assist the police in underwater criminal investigations and underwater searches and recoveries.

Far from diving for fun, this job unfortunately also involves the recovery of dead persons and decomposing bodies in low visibility waters.

Service in the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit is not for the faint hearted. ●