

RM Engineers 1939-45

A force of RM Engineers served in World War I and were disbanded, but by an Order in Council of 19 March 1940 the RM Engineers (RME) were to be formed. RME had dual headquarters, the Technical Officer being responsible to the Naval Civil Engineer-in-Chief, and an Administrative Officer responsible to the Adjutant General RM for military matters and discipline; but from July 1941 the command was headed by an RM Colonel who was also a civil engineer and given the dual responsibilities.⁸ By 1945 the prospect of a major commitment of these engineers in the Pacific area, led to the appointment of an RM general to command them, who was supported by operational, technical and administrative staffs. The admiralty, however, continued to allocate RME units to various commands. The initial strength was two companies, each with five technical and two administrative officers and 500 other ranks had an HQRME at Portsmouth, see RM Circular 1214/40s of 10 April 1940, for full details of the formation of the RME. A camp was established at Freshwater on the Isle of Wight. This original unit was expanded by May 1945 with a War Establishment of battalions commanded by Lieutenant-Colonels RM and each 1,500 strong. Although the full establishment was never reached, on 1 August 1945 there were 257 officers and 7,764 other ranks in the battalions, but the intended increase to 20,000 was cancelled.

Officers received pay and allowances at RM rates, and the tradesmen and pioneers received the rates paid to Royal Engineers. Most of the tradesmen were recruited from civilian skilled labour, and the technical officers (203 of the 257 in 1945) were civil engineers. In 1943 two companies ('T' and 'U') were formed to build airfields for the Mobile Naval Airfield (MNAF) Units. 'T' company on 23 August 1943 came under command of the Training Group at Dalditch, Devon, for administration and discipline. Both Companies were given training in demolition, in military operations and technical requirements for building airfields. Most of the RME training was carried out at the RME Depot, by this time, at Farrington, Berkshire. Advanced military training was also given at Eastney, Portsmouth.

Technical Equipment

By early 1943 each Mobile Naval Air Base Group (which controlled the MNAF units) had Mechanical Sections from the RMEs, equipped with special earthmoving and other plant for preparing difficult air strips. There was high investment per man in equipment, and by August 1945 approval had been given for expenditure of nearly £21/2 million (perhaps equal to £25 million in 1995) on further equipment. However there was understandable difficulty in obtaining equipment, which was much in demand for rebuilding European cities.

HMT Matiana (9,000 tons) was used in the Far East for transporting RMEs and their equipment; they also had MNBDO Landing Craft attached from time to time to land stores from her and other ships.

Principal deployments UK and Home Waters:

heavy engineering at Dover, Kent, and with airfields on the islands of Orkney; destroyer repair bases at Dunstaffnage, on the west coast of Scotland, and Corpach on Jura, Argyll; RN Air Station at Dale, Scotland; assembling American equipment for air stations and building naval landing pontoons at Eastham, Cheshire; repair of air raid damage and building Sandridge Camp near Plymouth; preparing hardstands (slipways) etc. in the spring of 1944 at embarkation ports and standing by for emergency repairs.

Mediterranean:

RMEs were frequently the only people available to restore captured ports. At Ferryville, Tunisia, Detachment 375 restored Nos 1 and 2 Docks; in Naples RMEs worked on clearing docks and built 3-skid slipways for the repair of minor landing craft, as they did at Anzio. In May 1944 with equipment from MNBDO II, RME person repaired and improved the naval oil fuel installations at Maddalana. The RME also built oil tanks in Tunisia, bridging and drainage at Leghorn docks, and guarded an important caustic soda plant, while under shell fire at San Vincenzo, Italy, before repairing it. The majority of RME personnel deployed in Italy, were withdrawn by the end of 1944.

North West Europe:

Detachments in Mulberry Harbour's installation crews at Arromanches, June 1944; work on clearing the port at Le Havre, working with US Navy's CBs; various camp and accommodation sites completed before units moved to Hamburg; work in the late summer of 1945 on naval HQs at Minden and Berlin; and maintaining installations in several German ports.

Far East:

RMEs built: an MTB base in Ceylon; the Gan airfield at Adu Atoll; and after the ports were liberated, RMEs went in to repair docks and installations at Akyab, Kyaukpy and Rangoon. One RME unit landed with the first Allied troops at Singapore in September 1945, and by December 1,460 men of the 3rd RME Battalion were working on dockyard repairs and the RM Electrical and Mechanical Engineer Company was helping to restore the supply of electric power to the dockyard. The RMEs were withdrawn in April 1946, from Singapore.

Two battalions (Detachment No. 580) were in Australia by the summer of 1945, preparing to develop the naval intermediate base which was to have been built at Manus in the Admiralty Islands, but this was abandoned in August. RMEs did not leave the Far East until May 1946, after completing work in Hong Kong.

Other deployments:

Special units erected Wireless/Telegraphy (W/T) masts at major stations, and others assembled refrigerators. Fuel Gear Assembly Parties (called 'OFGAPS') trained to install fuel tanks, jetties etc. RME units were drafted to MOLCABs, as their versatility made them particularly useful for these mobile bases.

General

The RMEs included divers for underwater work, frequently made use of local labour to speed reconstruction work, and their versatility ran from infantry skills to building major civil engineering projects with foundations on the sea bed. They were disbanded in the summer of 1946, as tradesmen had a priority in demobilisation.