

## **Op WINISK: Combat Engineers Conduct Domestic Commercial Explosive Clearance Operation as part of the Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Legacy Project**

By Capt A.C. Sinasac, 4 Tp Comd, 24 Fd Sqn, 2 CER

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The planning and preparation was intensive, but the end result was worth it for members of Task Force (TF) WINISK. The TF, commanded by Maj Lake, was based around 24 Fd Sqn from 2 CER with attachments from 2 Fd Amb, 430 ETAH, 2 Svc Bn, 2 MP Regt and 3 CRPG. The domestic operation arose out of a UXO Legacy Project request for support. The task was to clear commercial explosives left behind when the Canadian Armed Forces shut down the Mid-Canada Line Site 500, which was a key site in the Distant Early Warning Line to detect any incursion into Canadian airspace from the North. The site was operational from 1957 to 1965 and relied on gravel from the bed of the nearby Winisk River for runway and road maintenance. The site was vacated on such short notice that the personnel moving out had to leave behind the majority of buildings and vehicles, and they did not have the time or resources to remove the TNT they had embedded into a gravel pile in order to free gravel for airfield maintenance during the sub-arctic winter.



Sappers searching with metal detectors and excavating finds

Although this was a domestic operation, its complexity, the resources it required, and an utter lack of roads would make deployment to the remote northern Ontario island comparable to an overseas deployment- the perfect job for the Engineers' dismounted squadron. The deployment began on the first of September and took three days of Hercules flights to deliver all personnel and resources to the Forward Support Base in Peawanuck, Ontario, 32km from the operation's task site. There, the TF linked up with the local Ranger Patrol and the Griffon helicopter support from 430 ETAH, based out of Valcartier. It took another day to forward deploy 24 Fd Sqn's Airmobile Troop, 4 Troop, to their camp on Martel Island by Griffon helicopter, where they would work from for the duration of the task.



Pipe loaded with C4 charge to be burst into fragments

The explosive clearance operation took seven days for the troop of 26 personnel. They first had to clear the dense brush that had overgrown the gravel pile. The entire area was then marked off with a search grid before the Sappers meticulously combed through the nearly 5000 square meters of ground on and around the gravel pile. They searched with metal detectors and dug out several hundred small metal fragments, wires, and garbage with bare hands and non-sparking tools to locate any pipes that were packed with TNT and embedded in the pile. All in all, 97 pipes were found and the task was now to neutralize them.



Pieces of pipe, now explosive free

Several pipes were found either on the surface or close enough to the surface that they could be dug out by the sappers. These were chemically neutralized, washed out, and disposed of. The problem still remained of how to get the other pipes out of the gravel pile. At first, they tried pulling them straight out of the pile using the complex system of anchors, pulleys and ropes pulled by an electric winch devised by their Advanced Mountain Operations specialist, MCpl McCue, and Complex Terrain Instructor, MCpl Walton. When the weight of the pile on the pipes proved too much for this gear to handle, they got a bigger winch. This still did not have the heft to heave the pipes from their graves, however, so it was time to bring out the pinch hitter. C4 is always a favourite of the Engineers, and it did not disappoint this time either. A series of explosive shots were organized to cut the pipes off approximately 1m into the hill, open the ends clearly, and then burst the pipes into fragments using charges inserted down their entire length. This ensured that any explosives previously in the pipe would detonate, and it also opened the pipes to be washed out by the elements.



4 Troop clearing off of the task site

With the UXO Legacy Project representative, Nick Sanders, satisfied in all areas of site clearance, explosive safety and environmental stewardship, the troop packed up and headed back to rejoin the rest of their squadron. They still had several days to wait before their flight, however, so why waste it? Some valuable training was organized with the 430 Squadron Griffon crews and the Rangers, and the troops of 24 Fd Sqn honed their helicopter rappel insertion, marksmanship, and wilderness survival skills as well. They then reached out and thanked the local community for their support during the operation by building an outdoor hockey rink in true Engineer fashion.



Sappers ready to rappel from a Griffon

With the pride of a job well done and a wealth of new experience under their belts, the Engineers headed home on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September to some long awaited time with their families.



Sappers hard at work on the local ice rink