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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

NAVY DEPARTMENT

CENTRAL CHANCERY OF
THE ORDERS OF KNIGHTHOODSt. James's Palace, London S.W.1.
12th January 1971.

The QUEEN has been graciously pleased to give orders for the following appointment to the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire:

To be an Additional Member of the Military Division of the said Most Excellent Order for Gallantry:

Lieutenant (SD) (CD) Colin CHURCHER, Royal Navy.

On 6th February 1970, the Portsmouth and Medway Clearance Diving Team, led by Lieutenant Churcher, were called in to dispose of a German Ground Mine type GC which had been discovered during clearing operations in the West Warwick reservoir at Walthamstow.

These mines are fitted with an outstandingly dangerous combination of actuating and anti-removal devices. Until inspection proves the contrary, it must be assumed that any or all of the following devices are fitted: a magnetic and/or acoustic system, an arming clock "booby-trapped" with an anti-removal device, a 6-80 day timing circuit, and a light-sensitive mechanism. The main charge is 1,500 lbs. hexamite.

The team arrived on site shortly after mid-day and found the mine completely exposed and resting in about a foot of mud and water. A 1,000 yd. radius evacuation of the surrounding area, which contained factories and a few private dwelling houses had already been carried out.

Lieutenant Churcher, accompanied by one assistant, made a preliminary inspection of the mine, the outer case of which appeared to be in remarkably good condition. The bomb fuse and primary release were found to be somewhat mutilated, and because of their damaged condition, Lieutenant Churcher decided not to gag or immunise the fuse. The detonator plates were easily removed, and the leads were cut one at a time and isolated. The detonator itself proved relatively stubborn. As it was now comparatively safe, Lieutenant Churcher decided to leave it in place, rather than exert any undue force to remove it.

Because of the large quantity of explosive and the nature of the site, exploding the mine in situ was out of the question. As all the detonating devices had

not been identified and removed moving the mine was clearly impracticable. Lieutenant Churcher therefore decided to steam out the main charge in situ. This course of action would involve himself and a few members of his team in great but incalculable risks due to the effects of steam and extreme changes of temperature on the explosive and such detonating devices as had not been identified. As far as the local population were concerned, however, there would be a minimum of damage and inconvenience.

The Police and Local Authorities were informed of the plan, and the slow and dangerous task of steaming out and removing the main charge commenced at 1800. This progressed extremely well, being completed at midnight. A further two hours were then spent in filling sand bags with explosive from the mine case and preparing them for burning the next day.

The high degree of personal risk which existed during the period of preliminary inspection, rendering safe, and steaming out, was borne out by the excellent condition of the detonator and the booby trap arming clock on removal.

At 0930 on 7th February the main charge was ignited, burning for 15 minutes, and the fuse pocket successfully detonated. The empty mine case was later removed from the reservoir.

Lieutenant Churcher, who was in personal charge throughout this long operation, displayed outstanding skill, coolness and courage, exposing himself to great personal risk. His conduct at all times was in the highest traditions of the Service.

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12th January 1971.

The QUEEN has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the British Empire Medal for Gallantry (Military Division) to the undermentioned:

Petty Officer Barry Roy COULSON, P/J 947286.

Petty Officer Coulson was the senior rating of the Portsmouth and Medway Clearance Diving Team and personally assisted the Officer-in-Charge (Lieutenant Churcher) during the most crucial stages of this operation, displaying courage and devotion to duty.