

A Cigarette Case and the Story that it Told – Simon Wilson

It's just a cigarette case, made in Birmingham in 1921 and later repurposed for a presentation. It's decent quality but nobody uses cigarette cases these days, and even if they did, these old ones don't hold modern-sized cigarettes. If it wasn't for the inscription it would only be worth its silver value. I spotted it at an antiques fair one day, and thought it would make an interesting research project. However, in pre-internet days, my efforts proved unproductive, and I left it in a box under the bed for several decades. A couple of years ago I had another go, and did manage to unlock a story relating to the inscription, though not one I was expecting.



The cigarette case was presented to a member of the Royal Engineers for work in disposing of an unexploded bomb in 1942. The full text reads:

Presented to
SERGT. R.H. WOODROW R.E.
316161
in appreciation of courage shown
assisting Lieut. K. C. Revis R.E.
in defusing 1000 KG
PATCHAM.
13.5.42

I assumed that Lt Revis had given it to his Sergeant in appreciation for his efforts, and checked the London Gazette and Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Woodrow seems to have survived the war and his efforts were not officially recognised.

Between 1939 and 1945 members of bomb disposal teams in the UK dealt with over 50,000 unexploded German bombs, 7,000 British Anti-Aircraft shells which returned to earth without exploding, and 300,000 beach mines. In the period 21st September 1940 to 5th July 1941 (known as "The Blitz") an average of 84 bombs a day failed to explode on impact. Some were faulty but approximately one in twelve were dropped with time delay fuses. These were meant to disrupt everyday life, tie up resources and, in a war within a war, kill the men trying to defuse them.

In all, 394 officers and men were killed dealing with unexploded ordnance during the war. Of these 235 were Royal Engineers working in the UK. The rest were from other service branches, civilians, and the Home Guard, or were killed overseas. The figures are not easy to pin down, and don't include those killed after the war. The demining of the beaches, which started in 1943, continued after the war, and so did the casualties. The beach at Medmerry, West Sussex, is still closed to the public in 2025, as it has not been possible to clear it effectively. Trimmingham beach, in Norfolk, was not reopened to the public until 1966. Twenty six men died demining the beaches of Norfolk, six of them dying after the war, and they were recently commemorated on a memorial at Mundesley. By the end of demining operations it was estimated there were still around 100 live mines on the beach at Trimmingham, but this was much the same as other beaches in the area and was considered an acceptable level.



The Bomb at Patcham

Anyway, back to that bomb at Patcham, which is part of Brighton. There were 56 raids recorded on Brighton between 1940 and 1944, including one by a single bomber that killed 54 people on 14 September 1940. A newspaper report of a post-war exhibition about the bombing mentions 636 high explosive bombs being dropped in the area during the war, with 198 fatalities and 790 injuries of varying seriousness. The article says that the damage would have been far worse if it wasn't for the number of bombs that failed to go off and specifically mentions a 1,000 kg bomb "which was dropped in a garden at Patcham by a bomber afterwards shot down on the downs in May 1942." This would appear to be the bomb in question.

After failing to find any information on Woodrow, I decided to have a look at Revis. It would be a sobering but rewarding experience.

This article is taken from a number of internet sources, patched together into a story. It was originally published in 2021 and I have used the original article as the basis for this one. As you will see at the end, I have discovered something extra during the writing, but have chosen to add it as a postscript rather than integrate it into the main story.

Revis was interested in explosions as a boy (weren't we all?), before moving on to the less dangerous hobby of riding motorcycles. He became a civil engineer and, at the outbreak of war, was commissioned into the Royal Engineers, where he was assigned to bomb disposal duties. His first bomb was a 500kg device in a Hastings garden and he defused hundreds of bombs up to 1,800 kg. It wasn't an easy job and it was made harder by German attempts to kill or injure bomb disposal officers. As if the work wasn't dangerous enough, they fitted booby traps to some bombs and altered designs so that the accepted method of defusing a bomb one month became a booby trap next month. However, Revis was not caught by a German bomb. It was a British one that caused his troubles.

In the early days of the war, piers were seen as a danger to security as they could have helped the Germans land troops during the planned invasion. As a result the south and east coast piers were partially dismantled and wired for demolition. In 1943, as the danger passed, we started to remove the explosives. Three years in a corrosive environment did not make this a simple job. Revis successfully defused the mines on the Palace Pier on 10th September 1943. This wasn't quite as simple as it appears, as four of the "mines" were actually depth charges, and there were a number of booby traps included in the defence scheme. He then moved on to the West Pier and had successfully defused six mines when thirteen others exploded.

At one point in the next few days, a nurse pulled a sheet over him and he reputedly told her: "Take that bloody thing off – I'm not dead yet".

He was taken to East Grinstead Hospital where he became one of McIndoe's Guinea Pigs. During his time in hospital he used a bed previously occupied by Richard Hillary, author of *The Last Enemy*, and was visited by an American airman called Clark Gable, who was over here making the film *Combat*

America. (A film based in Polebrook and featuring Fotheringhay and Peterborough amongst its locations – it's amazing how many Peterborough links crop up.)



Revis and his Wife

When the bandages came off, it was clear that he would never see again. He taught himself to type and read Braille, using what was left of his fingers, and he trained to work a capstan lathe, producing Spitfire parts. He was awarded the MBE for his bomb disposal work and was asked by Sir Ian Fraser MP, a blind veteran of the Great War, and head of St Dunstan's (now Blind Veterans UK) to go to India to teach blinded ex-soldiers, which he did until 1947. I had come across a reference to a K C Revis being commissioned into the Indian Army late in the war but had assumed it was just a coincidence. It wasn't, and that is a lesson to me about research.

A brief summary of his later life includes qualifying as a solicitor, working as a Press Officer for Morris Motors, learning to water ski and flying a glider. He also drove a sports car down a runway at 100mph for a TV programme, as his wife sat in the passenger seat and gave directions. From bathing his eye sockets to risking her life in a sports car, she must have been an extraordinary woman.

He also appeared on *This is Your Life* and was the technical adviser for episode 12 of *Danger UXB* (1979) where he was played by Anthony Andrews. He also appeared on the documentary *Danger! Unexploded Bomb* (2001) and raised funds for the restoration of Brighton's West Pier. It seems that several people asked him why he would want to return to it after what happened to him. His reply? "People say that I should hate the place," he would say. "I can't explain why I keep going back. I suppose it's the last thing I saw."

He died in 2002 at the age of 84.

Postscript: There are details of a bomber that was shot down in May 1942 in roughly the right area, but it was several days before the date of the bomb disposal, and although it's likely that the operation took several days, I didn't think, at the time of writing, it was fair to assume they were linked.

At that point, as I was confirming information and looking for extra information and found that someone had written a biography of Revis – *Blinding Flash* by John Frayn Turner. It is, according to the strap line “The courage and sacrifice of a bomb disposal hero, Ken Revis MBE”.



The Heinkel He 111 involved

The Patcham bomb was dropped in early May and took four days to make safe. This seems to tie in with the raid of the night of 8/9 May. The aircraft in question was a Heinkel 111 which was reported as being shot down by a Beaufighter from 219 Squadron at Tangmere, hitting high tension cables as it crashed, stopping a local electric clock at 3am and producing a blinding flash. All the crew were killed and were buried in Brighton Bear Road Cemetery.

The bomb fell in a flower bed close to the foundations of the home of Mr and Mrs George Cook of Patcham, but didn't go deep, just a dozen feet, according to *Blinding Flash*. It took four days to excavate and make safe before removing it on the back of a lorry. After being evacuated for a few days the people of Patcham were very glad to get back to their homes, and to find that they were still there.

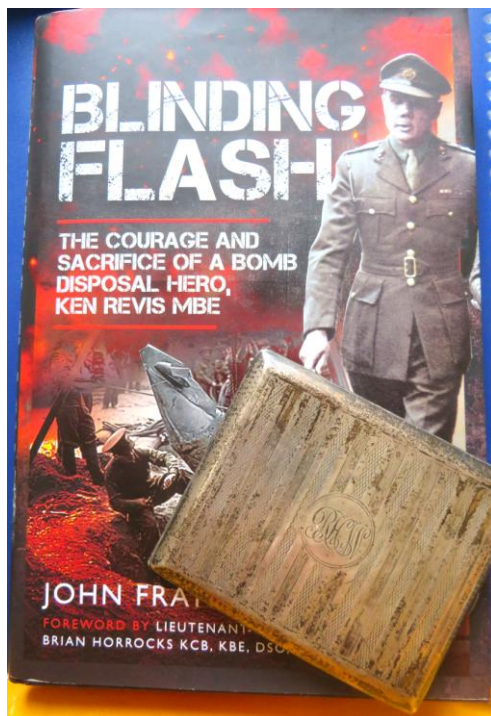
They invited the Engineers back to Patcham for a Thanksgiving service, where they were the guests of honour in a packed Church. Revis read the lesson and they were given mementoes of their time at Patcham. The men were given silver ID discs, Sergeant Woodrow was given a silver cigarette case and Lieutenant Revis received a silver cup.

Clearly, my initial thoughts on the case had been wrong and it was actually given to Woodrow by the people of Patcham rather than by Lieutenant Revis.

The inscription on Revis's cup says -

**PRESENTED TO LIEUT K. C. REVIS, R.E.
12TH BOMB DISPOSAL COY, R.E.
IN APPRECIATION OF COURAGE AND SKILL
SHOWN IN DEFUSING 1000 KG
PATCHAM, 13.5.42**

The story about the use of 1000 KG, instead of a word like bomb, is that the man planning the gifts, George Cook, asked them what they called the thing they were defusing. They replied that it was "1000 KG", because that was how they referred to them. And that is why the inscription on the cigarette case and the cup seem slightly stilted.



Left, the book 'Blinding Flash' telling the story of Ken Revis, with his cigarette case.

Next page, a plan showing where the bombs dropped on Brighton during the Second World War.

The full fiscal year of 25,000 copies was barely sold out. In addition, 4,374 copies of the book were made, and their sales yielded \$97 to the Denver Maternity Hospital.

