

Major George Fletcher

Bomb Disposal Officer who defused a wartime parachute mine which threatened to blow up whole streets



Fletcher with his wife Betty, 1954

MAJOR GEORGE FLETCHER, who has died aged 85, was awarded a George Medal for defusing a highly dangerous wartime German parachute mine which had lain buried in north London for more than 25 years.

On October 1 1969, following a report from the Kentish Town police, Fletcher led a bomb disposal team to a building site in Burghley Road, Camden. It was 30 yards from an underground line railway and 50 yards from a surface railway. Tall blocks of flats, terraced houses and busy roads were all within 150 yards.

In an excavation, about 10ft deep, he identified a Type C parachute mine. Originally intended to sink ships, these weapons - 9ft-Jong and packed with more than 1,500lb of explosive - had been dropped during the Blitz on London, where their blast proved capable of devastating entire streets.

They were fitted with multiple detonators, and Fletcher had to assume that this example might contain any permutation of a magnetic or acoustic system, a clockwork bomb fuze "booby-trapped" with an anti-removal device, a six- to 80-day timing circuit and a light-sensitive mechanism.

After about 500 people had been evacuated from the area, Fletcher and his team carefully exposed the mine. It appeared to be in good condition but there was no question of blowing it up where it lay.

It was calculated that to dig down and neutralise the detonating devices before steaming out the explosive would take up to 40 hours; and any burrowing would expose the entire team to danger. To leave the bomb embedded in the clay, however, with the fuzes intact, and steam out the explosive would take only about 10 to 12 hours, yet would potentially put a small number of the squad at great risk.

Fletcher chose the latter course, knowing that the effects of the steam and the consequent change of temperature might start the clock at any moment. At 4pm he and Sergeant-Major Stephen Hambrook removed the filling plate of the mine and began the hazardous task of steaming out the explosive.

There proved to be a complex fuze system, and a triggering device for the clock set for 17 seconds which had jammed after seven; 10 seconds were left to run. If the clock re-started, they would have only three seconds to attempt to "choke off" the fuze mechanism and then seven seconds to get clear;

"I sometimes wonder," Fletcher said later, "if anything went wrong whether one would see a blinding flash or if one knows nothing at all."

The steaming out process took all night, during which time Fletcher and Hambrook had to approach the site to make regular checks. Having steamed out the bulk fill, they detonated the still highly dangerous fuzing systems, and at 7am the mine was declared safe. The citation for Fletcher's award stated that he had exposed himself to great risk over a long period. Hambrook was also awarded a GM.

In recognition of their bravery, two of the blocks of flats that were built on the site were named after them and the BBC featured them in a programme called *Seven Seconds to Run*, one of a series entitled *He Who Dares*.

George Raymond Fletcher, the son of a tug boat skipper, was born at Grimsby on May 22 1924. Aged 15, he went to the Army Technical School at Beachley Camp, Chepstow, and on completing his apprenticeship he was posted to 1 Training Battalion RE.

In the Second World War he took part in the Normandy landings and the advance to the Rhine. Commissioned in 1947, he specialised in bomb disposal, clearing and making safe the beaches of the Norfolk coast before being posted to Malta in 1950. In 1952 Fletcher represented the Royal Engineers on a scientific expedition to north Greenland and was awarded the Polar Medal. He then moved to Benghazi, Libya, where, as a garrison engineer, he was involved in rebuilding roads and bridges. He was appointed MDE in 1950.

He was later posted back to Beachley, to the Army Apprentice College, After an appointment as second-in-command of 33 Royal Engineer Regiment, from 1971 to 1973 he commanded the Defence Explosive Ordnance Disposal School.

Fletcher retired from the Army in 1979. He settled at Whitstable, Kent, and enjoyed sailing his 35ft yacht, which he had built himself.

George Fletcher died on November 11 He married, in 1952, Betty Bedford, who survives him with their son and daughter.