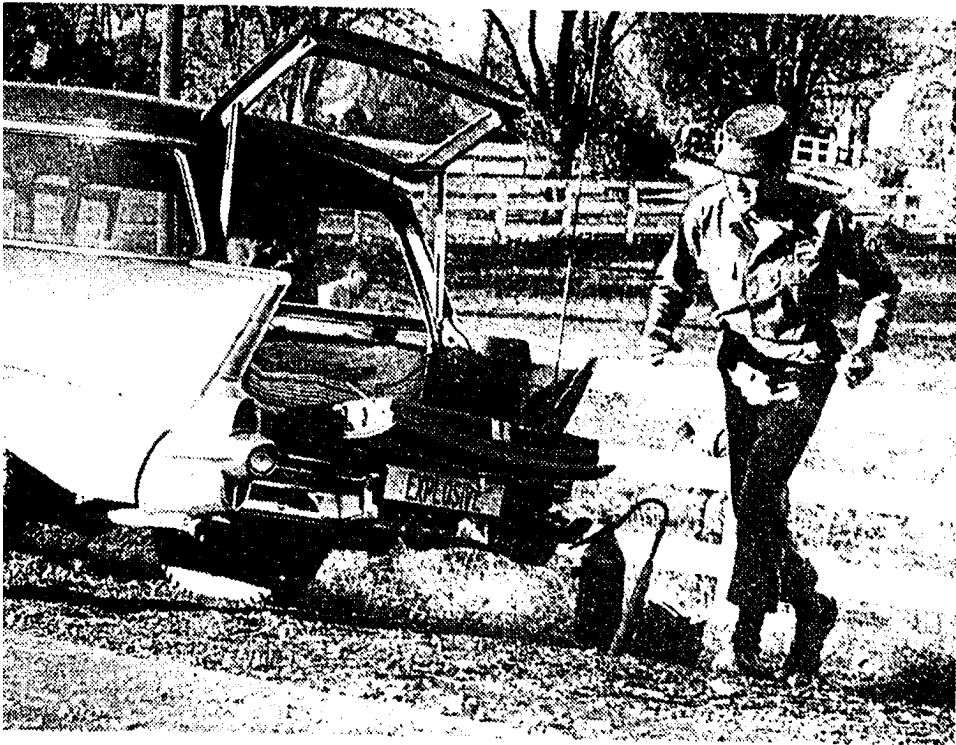


Sewer Yields 500 Dynamite Sticks

By John Goshko Staff Reporter

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Photos by Jim McNamara. Staff Photographer

Capt. DeBellis smiles in relief as he cleans his hands after emerging from sewer with dynamite.

Capt. Vincent DeBellis, of the 57th Ordnance Detachment at Ft. Belvoir, descends

into a manhole to remove dynamite from sewer near Rte. 50 in Fairfax yesterday.

Sp. 6/c Joseph Sicilia, of the explosives disposal squad, runs with dynamite to-

ward a mattress cradle in rear of special station wagon after removal from sewer.

Hidden Peril on Route 50

Sewer Yields 500 Dynamite Sticks

By John Goshko
Staff Reporter

An Army bomb-disposal unit, working with nerve-grating precision, yesterday removed more than 500 sticks of more-than-usually explosive dynamite from a sanitary sewer alongside a heavily-traveled stretch of Rte. 50 in Fairfax City.

A six-man detail from the 57th Ordnance Detachment at Ft. Belvoir removed the dynamite, stick by stick, in a painstaking five-hour operation that began shortly after the explosives were discovered by Fairfax Sanitation Department workers.

Five rotting cartons filled with the dynamite were found in a sewer alongside Rte. 50 about 300 yards west of the Kamp Washington Shopping Center and directly across the road from the business offices of the Virginia Electric and Power Co.

Fairfax City police closed off a quarter-mile stretch of the road to all traffic while the soldiers, commanded by Capt. Vincent DeBellis, removed the explosives. The police decided evacuation of employees from the Vepco build-

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ing or of residents in the vicinity was not necessary.

DeBellis, who had answered the police call for assistance so quickly that he had no time to change from his Class A uniform to fatigues, climbed into the sewer to examine the explosives.

"The dynamite had been there for a long time," he said, "and quite a bit of the nitroglycerine had oozed out and frozen into a puddle. If it had remained there much longer, even the slightest agitation from a passing truck could have set it off."

For almost three hours,

the 37-year-old DeBellis rummaged in the sewer, gingerly separating each of the rounded sticks from its mates and handing them up to his men. Each stick was then carried carefully to a nearby station wagon and laid gently on a mattress.

All but four of the dynamite sticks were removed by this slow, painstaking process. The remaining four had become embedded in the frozen nitroglycerine and, as one soldier said, "could be moved safely only from a distance."

DeBellis gently massaged the pool of frozen explosive with oil to soften it and tied a length of twine around the four sticks.

He and Sp/6 Joseph Sicilia trailed the long twine across the road to a shallow ditch. There, the two crouched down and for several agonizing minutes gently pulled and tugged at the twine like anglers playing a dangerous fish.

Finally, just as darkness was beginning to fall, the four sticks came loose and were pulled slowly over the edge of the manhole of the sewer, dangling at the end of the twine.

The dynamite was moved to the Fairfax Sanitary Fill and burned.

David L. Brice, chief of the Fairfax City inspections divisions, said he had "several ideas" about how the dynamite got into the sewer. He declined to elaborate "until the police have had a chance to investigate the matter further."

Brice said the dynamite was discovered after he drove past the spot last week and noticed that the manhole cover was loose. He ordered the Sanitation Department to repair the cover.

When workers arrived to fix the cover yesterday morning, they spotted the cartons filled with ominous-looking, rounded brown sticks. They notified police who, in turn, put in a hurry-up call for assistance to Capt. DeBellis and his men.

DeBellis, who emerged from the sewer perspiring heavily in the crisp autumn air, said: "Man, I was warm down there—warm on the outside and even warmer on the inside."

Before he and his men left to take the explosives to the dump, DeBellis tossed a lighted rag into the manhole to burn up any traces of nitroglycerine that might have been left behind.

A few moments later, the highway was reopened to traffic. But most of the motorists who sped past in the gathering darkness did not even see the tiny wisp of smoke curling from the open manhole: the only sign of the desperate hours that had gone before.