

SHADOW OF DISASTER

British troops help after earthquake rocks Mexico

AS SOLDIER went to press the sappers of 32 Field Squadron, 38 Engineer Regiment, were still continuing their mission work on 12-hour shifts in earthquake-stricken Mexico City battling against stamina-sapping conditions 8,000 feet above sea level.

Led by Major Derek Webb, the sappers rushed in from neigh-

bouring Belize where they are on a six-months detachment from Ripon, and were working within 90 minutes of arrival on their designated site, the Telmex Phone Exchange in Calle Victoria.

The devastated exchange han-

dle an estimated 40 per cent of Mexico City's phone traffic. Three upper floors of the 20-year-old wing collapsed when the quake struck; floors housing modern equipment used for international links.

The Troop's initial task was to shore up the cellar and the ground and first floors. Of prime importance was the protection of the cellar as all the lines of the exchange run through it.

The Yorkshire-based sappers are working in conjunction with a locally-based international construction force and the labour force of the State-owned Telmex.

Major Webb tells SOLDIER: "Our combined efforts, and it is very much a joint effort at every level, have ensured that work progresses rapidly. Our plan is based on military experience to design the shoring which was placed on advice of civil engineers and Telmex whose knowledge of the building was useful.

"Unfortunately, no plans of the building were available as they had been lost in a fire 18 months ago and recce included a rapid survey of the remaining structure. Resources and equipments are very nearly produced instantly whenever we ask for anything. There are only rare delays on items such as skips which are obviously in demand throughout the city."

The sappers were re-supplied when a second RAF Hercules brought in additional equipment including lighting towers.

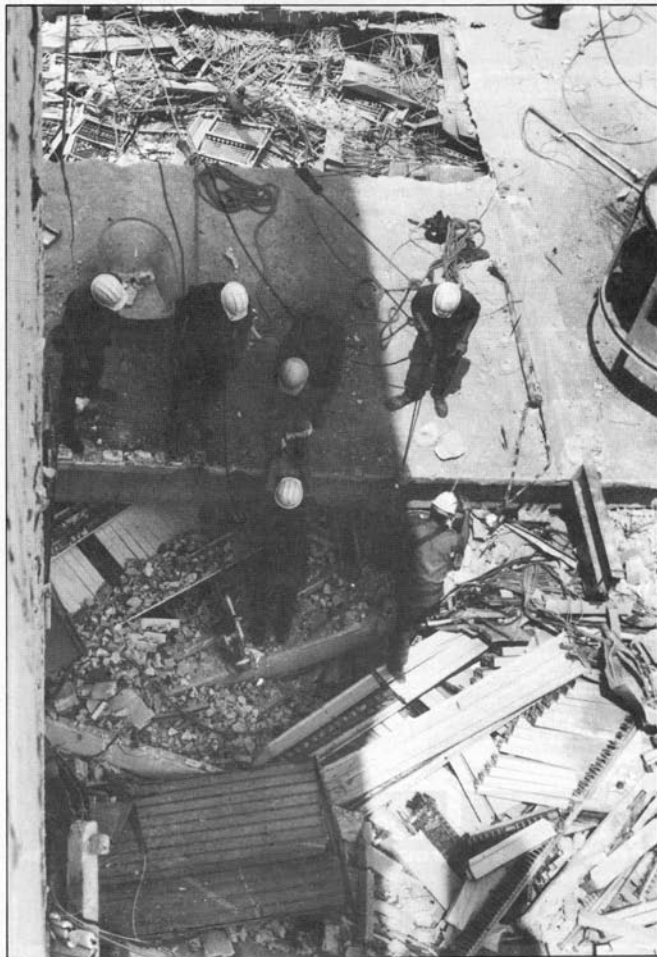
Initially, the Royal Engineer Troop had been working 16-hour shifts. Work was hard and difficult with the positioning of five-metre telegraph poles in a grid just two metres apart in between exchange equipments themselves less than one metre apart.

Major Webb said: "Movement of poles and, later, four-inch steel piping into the building over the rubble and through awkward passages around the inevitable cable runs was equally tough. The men became very tired but have recovered now the shifts are of 12 hours."

He added, with irony: "We are accommodated in four-bunk rooms which are normally used by operators either side of their night shifts. In some respects this is better than our accommodation in Belize!"

As they work the cooks' tent

Royal Engineers clearing rubble from the telephone and communications centre in Mexico City. The shadow symbolises the effect of an earthquake which killed thousands, made thousands more homeless, and crumbled buildings



LOTS OF HELP FOR SAPPERS

NEXT TASK: 2,600 tons of rubble...

eating and washing area has been set up on a nearby roof and the British resident community has been of great help to the sappers.

One builder works full-time with them. Another has arranged for the laundering of uniforms. Compo rations are supplied by the Red Cross delivery of fresh rations.

Now, the sapper samaritan squad is engaged on phase two of its contribution; the removal of some 2,600 tons of rubble and masonry amid the crushed telephone equipment.

"The Troop is working on the more difficult areas where beams overhang in a bulge on the end of the building," said Major Webb. "We are using abseil ropework techniques as well as a high-lift hydraulic inspection bucket. Working areas are unstable and unpleasant as ten bodies are known to be in the damaged part of the building. Working at 8,000 feet above sea level is tiring. We still experience occasional very minor earthquakes."

Helping the Troop in its daily efforts are elements from Commander British Forces Belize including an RAMC doctor, two Army Catering Corps cooks and RAF doctors. Also there, as interpreters, are three personnel from the Belize Defence Force (BDF).

The RAF Puma and the Royal Signals detachment have returned to Belize.

And still the skill and professional style of the sappers goes on amid the debris.

PRAISE FROM THEIR CO

Lieutenant Colonel Nigel Lacey, CO of 38 Engineer Regiment, based at Ripon, said: "The men have really done exceptionally well in extremely difficult circumstances. I think the work they have been doing and the energy they are putting in absolutely typifies not only Major Webb but the squadron as a whole."

In all, there are about 45 Army personnel in the relief operation in Mexico City, including the sapper troop.



The safety harnesses tell their own story of hazard (above) as sappers toil in the rubble. Below, huge blocks of concrete show the scale of the problem. Pictures: Derek Webb

