

A group of highly specialised soldiers - Royal Engineer divers - have been honing their skills on a six-week advanced diver course at the National Diving and Activity Centre in Chepstow. Richard Long reports.

WITH ever-increasing demands being placed on the Army's impressive arsenal of manpower, there has never been a greater need for personnel to excel in a variety of tasks.

While 'soldier first' remains the mantra for all servicemen and women in the British Army, their trades and secondary roles also play a key part in the success of operations and exercises around the world.

For Royal Engineer divers there is no exception to this rule, and these highly-skilled sappers have proved themselves to be the very definition of a flexible force.

Their ability to plummet to depths of up to 50 metres and carry out assignments ranging from vehicle recoveries to demolition work is impressive enough, but this is merely an accompaniment to their day jobs.

As well as proving their worth as divers, they have primary trades to focus on, along with their commitments as soldiers, meaning they have a three-pronged approach to their busy Army careers.

To earn a place in the water at the National Diving and Activity Centre in Chepstow, candidates must pass a selection phase and then complete a basic diving course before moving onto a challenging advanced programme.

This six-week schedule helps personnel master the open space diving system as well as teaching them how to operate key tools such as hydraulic cutters, breaking equipment and thermal cutting systems. They also learn a host of new skills including underwater concreting and advanced reconnaissance, which can be used to locate submerged vehicles in theatre:

"We are not full-time divers," explained Captain Steve Crosby-Jones, Royal Engineers, the diving officer who co-ordinates serials for the basic and advanced courses.

"As well as completing their training they will still be sappers on the ground. They can be used for their recovery capability but it is a secondary trade.

"In theatre, the diving teams have been doing a variety of work. This includes body recoveries, the salvage of weapons from the bottom of wells or canals and underwater demolition tasks.

"They are a team and asset that are crucial to operations, especially when guys lose equipment such as rifles and radios; there is no other capability that can recover that kit."

While divers have proved to be a valuable resource in theatre, they are not deployed in this role

alone:

"Diving is very much an 'as and when' resource," the officer said. "Some operational tours will inevitably have more serials than others.

"But every theatre we have been to - Iraq, Northern Ireland, the Balkans - divers have been used. It is a capability that is there and, if we take it away, we will never get it back."

The Defence Diving School runs four basic and two advanced courses a year and there is healthy competition for places.

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As well as being open to the Royal Engineers, the programme welcomes troops from 17 Port and Maritime Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps:

"It definitely builds their teamwork. If they do not work as a group they will not pass," Captain Crosby-Jones said. "We do not have any problems when the guys come back for the advanced course. When they leave they are fully qualified and they are here because they want to be."

Once they have completed their training the soldiers go back to their regiments and join diving teams, where they pass on the knowledge they have gained. They also have the option of returning to complete a diving supervisors' course.

Trainee Lance Corporal Daniel Brown, Royal Engineers, has been determined to make the most of the opportunities available and has set his sights on further progress in the future:

"Since I did my basic course I have stayed in the diving world. After passing that, all I have done is dive," he said.

"I would never have got into this if it had not been for the Army. As I went through my training I heard stories about how difficult this course was and that made me want to sign up.

"It took me quite a while to get a place as it is so popular. At my last unit there were a lot of fit guys who were keen to try this kind of thing. I was one of the lucky ones who got on it.

"My next step is to do the supervisors' course and if possible I would like to come back to the school to work as part of the support staff."

For Lance Corporal Dylan Jones, Royal Engineers, life below the surface has provided welcome variety from his day job as a carpenter and joiner:

"It is just something I fancied doing," he explained. "The money [specialist pay] is an incentive but it is another string to my bow.

"The basic stage was fast and furious but this has been quite good. There is a lot to learn but it is a relaxed environment to work in."

He now feels fully prepared to put his skills into practice in Afghanistan, if the call comes:

"It is something we have trained for. You don't want to be going in to pick up a body, but it is a possibility. I am confident I could go out there and get the job done. This is fantastic training and I am pleased to have gone down the diving route."

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