Launched in 2012, the aim of Operation Nightingale was to develop skills to meet demand amongst soldiers returning from operations in Afghanistan. The project aims to provide valuable recovery and learning opportunities by utilising heritage and archaeological practice. Mark Khan reveals how the project has not only uncovered fascinating pieces of history, but that the UK's past is helping some of its service personnel prepare for the future.

The initiative came about as a result of the joint efforts of Richard Osgood, Senior Historic Advisor with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) part of the Ministry of Defence and Sergeant Diarmaid Walsh of the Royal Army Medical Corps, attached to 1 RIFLES. Sergeant Walsh, who was responsible for the medical care and treatment of soldiers of the RIFLES, including injured personal returned from operations, had identified a growing need for some form of occupational therapy to aid recovery for soldiers who could benefit from taking part in such activity.

The principle behind the project is to utilise both the technical and social aspects of field archaeology to help in the recovery and skill development of those injured whilst in service. There is a close correlation between the skills required by the modern soldier and those of the professional archaeologist. These skills include surveying, geophysics (for ordnance recovery or revealing cultural heritage sites), scrutiny of the ground (for improvised explosive devices or artefacts), site and team management, mapping, navigation and the physical ability to cope with hard manual work in often inclement weather conditions. Led by Richard Osgood, the concept was molded into reality to be become Operation Nightingale.

Under the banner of Nightingale a number of projects have already been carried out, including a major project in the summer of 2012 which took place on Ministry of Defence land on Salisbury Plain at the site of a Bronze Age barrow known as Barrow Clump. A Scheduled Monument, the site was known to contain a number of Anglo-Saxon graves. As a result of damage caused by badgers, which had disturbed the burials, English Heritage had previously examined Barrow Clump, resulting in several graves being discovered as a result of excavations. As badgers are a protected species and could not be removed from the site, the likelihood was that further damage would occur. Officially listed as a heritage at risk site (due to the badger disturbance), Barrow Clump was chosen as an ideal project to be excavated as part of Operation Nightingale. The exercise was a co-operative effort.
between Operation Nightingale, Wessex Archaeology, Leicester University, Channel Four’s Time Team and numerous volunteers. The project was also supported by a number of commercial organisations. It ran for six weeks during the summer of 2012 and was extremely successful, with much valuable archaeological information being uncovered.

Whilst the focus was on the Saxon graves, as part of the excavation a number of items relating to the military use of Salisbury Plain were uncovered. Many of these could be dated and illustrated the history of Salisbury Plain as a military training area from the time of its early use through to the current day. Whilst many of the artefacts were related to the detritus left behind after generic military training, one item of a personal nature was uncovered – an Army issue fork. Personal items such as knives, forks and spoons are often marked with the owner’s identity, sometimes names but more commonly service numbers. On examination, it was noted that the fork uncovered at Barrow Clump, which was found to be dated 1931, had a number stamped into the handle. Subsequent research has revealed that the service number – 821579 – was that of Gunner James Rodger Moderate.

Moderate served with 3 Battery, 6 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment Royal Artillery and is recorded as having died, aged 30, on 5 March 1943. The link between the fork discovered on Salisbury Plain and Gunner Moderate’s death in the Far East posed many interesting questions. Indeed, his story would turn out to be one that is representative of the fate of so many British and Commonwealth prisoners of war captured by the Japanese during the Second World War. Deployed as part of the BEF, 6 HAA Regiment was sent to France in 1939. The unit was evacuated back to the UK in the face of the German advance in 1940, but was forced to leave much of its...
with the British capitulation. Amongst the 80,000 British and commonwealth troops captured were the surviving members of 3 Battery, 6 HAA Regiment.

We know nothing specifically of James Moderate’s actions during the fall of Singapore and his subsequent time as a prisoner of war. We can however pick up his story in early October 1942. That month, the Japanese announced that 600 PoWs, made up largely of men of the Royal Artillery with men from attached units, were to be sent as forced labour to Rabaul on the island of New Britain in Papua New Guinea. Transported by ship in horrendous conditions, many of the men were extremely ill at the time. Arriving at Rabaul, the men were set to work in appalling conditions and were brutally treated by their Japanese captors.

At the end of November 1942, 517 of the fittest prisoners were selected to be transported by ship to Ballale Island. One of the Shortland Islands – a group of islands belonging to the western province of the Solomon Islands - Ballale Island was first occupied by Japanese forces in November 1942. Pear-shaped and approximately 2,000 yards east-west and 1,900 yards north-south, the island had sufficient land for a single wide airstrip and taxiways on either side.

The first Japanese units arrived on the island on 3 November 1942, to begin construction work on an airstrip. It was for this purpose that the prisoners were needed. The construction of the airfield on Ballale Island was the responsibility of the Japanese 18 Naval Construction Unit which was commanded by Lieutenant Commander Norihiko Ozaki. Ozaki would later recall the arrival of the Allied PoWs:

"It was probably several days later after landing on the island that we saw a comparatively large-sized transport, anchored off the coast of the island, starting to unload several hundred persons who appeared to be prisoners. In the meantime, a Second Lieutenant acting as the commanding officer came to me and said: ‘I have brought you 527..."
Above Left: The clearing of soil around the carriage continues. Carrying out this task in a methodical manner ensures that nothing is missed during the excavation – an example of this being the remains of one of the wooden seats that were found buried under the carriage. An examination of the carriage found that the rivets which held the gun cradle to the frame had been deliberately removed – a task that would have required engineering equipment such as a blowtorch. It is therefore likely that the carriage went out on to the range as a target without the barrel, maybe sporting a length of wood or something similar as a substitute for a gun.

Above Right: The second gun carriage that formed part of the Operation Nightingale project on Saturday, 26 January 2013. The unexploded shell that brought work here to a halt can be seen bottom left. The shell, a clear illustration of the risks and dangers of carrying out any excavations on sites with a military background, was subsequently destroyed by the attendant EOD team in a controlled explosion.

Right: The all-important data plate that was recovered from one of the gun carriages (the one on which excavations were halted) during a preliminary site visit. This helped identify the carriage as being that of an Ordnance QF (Quick Firing) 15-pounder Mk.1A.

Identify individual remains; only one identification tag was ever found in the burial site, and this belonged to an American pilot. There were, however, enough clues to lead to the conclusion that the remains belonged to Allied PoWs. The bodies were eventually re-interred in individual graves in Bomana War Cemetery in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

The Australian investigation laid the blame for the atrocity firmly on Lieutenant Commander Ozaki.

On 18 January 1946, the Allied Supreme Headquarters in Tokyo issued an arrest warrant for Ozaki, who was to be tried as a suspected war criminal in connection with the deaths of 517 PoWs on Balási Island.

Ozaki had survived the war and, on 19 January 1946, he was arrested and detained in Sugamo Prison in Tokyo. Questioned about the deaths he claimed that Allied bombing had killed many PoWs. He did, however, reveal the true fate of the surviving prisoners. He described what happened as a result of the American air raid on the night of 27 June 1943, and the bombardment by Naval Task Group 36.2 on 29 June 1943:

"Every regiment was making arrangements for the eventual enemy’s surprise landing and attack and were working hard all night, but the enemy did not attack our island. After all, because of vigorous changes and disadvantages in the war situation, everybody’s morale was strained by extreme excitement. Under this pressure the provisions of the defence plan, including
ABOVE: During the excavation of the gun carriages, another surprise discovery was made by one of the Operation Nightingale team. Substantial pieces of metal, mostly buried, were noticed on the surface near one of the excavation sites. When this new area was briefly examined, the remains of what might be an ammunition wagon, limber or an artillery observation ladder platform, possibly elements of 15-pounder support equipment, were unearthed. It is hoped that a future project will help reveal more of this find.

ABOVE RIGHT: A First World War photograph of an artillery observation ladder platform in use—showing the similarity with a gun limber which the surprise find on 26 January 2013 was initially believed to be.

The execution of the prisoners, was carried out automatically. It can also be said that faced with a crisis, this action was unavoidable.  

Despite the statements by Ozaki, he was never charged. In due course he had to be released and was never brought to justice. Notwithstanding his ”confession” (as described in the papers of the post-war investigation), the best sources of information were from two Koreans who had served with the Japanese on the island. Their evidence was deemed be only that of hearsay and circumstantial in nature. It was not possible to place a specific charge against Ozaki due to lack of positive proof. He had to be released and was never brought to justice.

With no known grave, Gunner Moderate is commemorated on the Singapore Memorial which stands in Kranji War Cemetery. Some thirteen miles north of the city of Singapore, the Singapore Memorial, bears the names of over 24,000 casualties of the Commonwealth land and air forces. As well as his name carved on the memorial, one small, tangible reminder of Gunner Moderate’s service is the fork unearthed during the excavation at Barrow Clump, an artefact fittingly uncovered as part of an archaeological excavation carried out by soldiers of a later generation.

Following the success of the Barrow Clump project the potential for further archaeological projects within the MoD estate on Salisbury Plain was examined. One project focussed on the possibility of locating and excavating the crash site of a German Junkers Ju 188 which records indicated...
crashed on the plain in May 1944. Assisted by aviation historians, details of the incident were ascertained, along with information which, importantly, included a grid reference for the crash site. A field walking reconnaissance examined the location in November 2012, and though the impact site was located, no indication of wreckage was discovered. Whilst returning to the vehicles, one member of the reconnaissance team, Corporal Martin Puxley, noticed an object laying on the surface. Disappointment at failing to have found the crashed Luftwaffe bomber was somewhat mitigated when it became apparent that what had been stumbled upon were the substantial remains of a First World War field gun.

The remains of the gun, or more correctly the gun carriage as no barrel could be seen, were identified as most likely that being those of an 18-pounder field gun. As much of the carriage lay covered by thick grass or partially buried, an archaeological examination would reveal the true extent of the remains. Operation Nightingale had its next project.

A plan was quickly put together to perform the recovery. A further reconnaissance was carried out over the Christmas period, during which the remains of a second gun carriage were identified. Whilst less complete, this gun carriage still retained its data plate, indicating that is was an Ordnance QF (Quick Firing) 15-pounder Mk 1A. The plate, dated 1910, revealed that the carriage came from the Royal Carriage Department at Woolwich Arsenal. On Saturday, 26 January 2013, an Operation Nightingale team assembled on Salisbury Plain. Led by Richard Osgood, the group's intention was to recover both of the gun carriages using archaeological practices.

The project, named Exercise Firepower, also involved Gunners from the nearby Artillery Centre at Larkhill, an Explosive Ordnance Disposal team, a Royal Engineer Survey unit, and other volunteers. The all-important logistic support was provided by the RAF.

Once the team had set up on site, the carriages' locations were recorded and the two sites worked on archaeologically. The two excavation sites varied quite significantly. One carriage lay on the surface and appeared largely intact; the other was less complete and largely buried. Work on the less intact remains, those which had the maker's plate attached, was halted when an item of unexploded ordnance was uncovered. The excavations then centered on the remaining more intact gun. This was slowly uncovered, in the course of which it became obvious that this carriage was still in reasonably good condition. Initially thought to be an 18-pounder, one of the volunteers, an artillery expert, identified the carriage as being that of a second 15-pounder.

The story of the 15-pounder is directly related to the development of modern artillery equipment in the British Army. During the Boer War, much of the equipment then in service was found to be lacking. This included the artillery. As a result of these experiences, reforms were launched to provide better weapons. To provide a stop-gap measure until more modern British artillery could be developed, 108 German-manufactured 15-pounder Quick Firing guns were purchased from the Rheinische Metallwaren Company in 1901. The acquisitions were undertaken in great secrecy, the British not wishing to publicize the fact that it was being forced to buy a foreign gun. Anti-British feeling was also running high in Germany at the time. Known as the Enhardt Gun after its designer Heinrich Enhardt, the 15-pounder was one of the best guns of a new type of quick firing guns that were then coming into service with foreign armies. Indeed, these guns would revolutionize the UK's development and use of artillery.

The basic artillery piece had changed little for hundreds of years prior to the development of the Quick Firing (or QF) gun. The new QF gun could be loaded and fired quickly without the need for the crew to stand clear. This was due to a new recoil system that absorbed the energy of the gun when it fired, enabling it to remain in position and not have to be constantly re-sighted. It also allowed the gun layer to remain sitting on the gun and the crew to reload the weapon quickly.

The German-manufactured 15-pounder guns played a vital role helping the Royal Artillery develop an understanding of the use of QF guns, which eventually resulted in the adoption of the 18-pounder and 13-pounder field guns. Both weapons would prove to be superb artillery pieces that served with distinction during the First World War.

Until the two examples were uncovered on Salisbury Plain by Operation Nightingale, no examples of these British 15-pounder guns were known to exist. It is hoped that the recovered carriage will be restored and will eventually go on display representing an unusual and important part of the development and history of British artillery – all thanks to the Nightingale team and the service personnel who are helping uncover these links with the past.

NOTES:
1. The statement made by Lieutenant Commander Ozaki is reproduced here with the kind permission of the National Archives of Australia (Melbourne branch) Document MP742/1 336/1/1460.
2. Quoted by Ken Wright in "I Have Finally Decided to Kill Myself", www.asopa.typepad.com.