

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

The mantra in rugby circles was what happens on tour stays on tour, but **ROB POWELL** figures enough time has elapsed to share a close call during a military exercise in the mid-90s.

Back in the day I was an armament technician in the RNZAF. Our trade covered everything that went bang, such as ejection seats, aircraft weapons, firearms, and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD). It was great fun, especially when we went on deployment with the squadrons to exotic destinations such as Gisborne, Hokitika and Timaru.

All of our EOD training was conducted north of Helensville at Kaipara. This is a large open area covered in sand dunes, and the air force has been using it for over 50 years for EOD training and air-dropped weapons practice with high explosive bombs and rockets.

Given that it gets quite dry there over summer, we had numerous waterholes to provide a water source for rural fire fighting.

These tended to fill up with the sand that constantly shifts around, so we needed to clear them out from time to time. It was impractical and expensive to get mechanical diggers in to do this, so we used commercial explosives to do the work for us. (This is precisely why farmers and others use explosives to blow waterholes, trenches and to remove tree stumps.)

We used to run an annual training camp for our junior engineering officers (known as Jengos) so they would have an appreciation of the effects of explosives in an operational environment. We would start with rigging small charges, and then move on to military ordnance such as grenades, artillery shells and aircraft bombs. In this particular case, we then finished with the waterhole clearance.

Being officers, we had the Jengos take turns in managing the blows as their experience grew. We had safety distance charts, but generally left the selection of safety points to the individual in charge. The waterhole to be cleared was at the base of a large sand dune and we had a good wind blowing in from the sea, so my colleague (who we will call Sgt P) went with the Officer in Charge (OIC) to select the safety point while I supervised the digging in of 2000 kg of Powergel in and around the waterhole.

Once all was done we made for the selected safety point, and shortly afterwards the OIC lit the fuse and stumped up the hill to join us. I gave Sgt P a worried look – we were waaaay too close, being within 100m of two tons of explosives. We decided to move further back from the lip of the dune and just as we did so the whole thing went KABLOOEY. I can recall that it was like being in a huge earthquake and the whole horizon was filled with sand, water, ferns and frogs.

The strong wind caught the plume and flung the debris inland and away from us. Sgt P and I looked at each other, shouted “Woohoo!” and started heartily laughing (as you do when you have a stupidly close call and have escaped unharmed). All the officers were impressed with the spectacle, and we duly celebrated later on with a few beersies.

Looking back on it, the biggest lesson for me is that we need to raise concerns if we think a dangerous situation is developing. The culture at the time was such that we didn’t challenge the OIC for his selection of such an unsuitable safety point, but as the experts on hand we should have moved everyone back at least four times the distance he specified.

That incident forced me to look at my own personal attitudes and values, and initiated the safety-focused career path that I am now on.

I now also have no worries about saying “That’s really good, but have you considered ...?”



The author is pictured admiring a 1000-pound bomb from a distance some would describe as unhealthy close.