

Stop, Cut, Cease

This Isn't the M

By SSgt. Rodney Smith

The most successful movies are the ones where the director lets the viewer place himself inside each scene and gain the full effect of what the story is about. This sense of realism, without the sense of danger, is what allows the viewer to fully enjoy all the special effects without the possibility of getting hurt.

We all know there is a distinct difference between what happens on the movie screen and what happens in real life. For example, a Marine who is running down the middle of a battlefield dodging explosions all around him is a scene best kept on the screen. It is common knowledge in the Marine Corps that if you were standing in the middle of an impact area, and had demolitions exploding all around you, your chances of being injured are high.

So, if asked, would you place yourself in the middle of an impact area while demolitions are exploding? Common sense would most likely make you say no. But, for a group of student combat engineers, the answer was just the opposite.

The instructors wanted to add realism to the training and asked the students if they wanted to see and feel the effects of the explosions while inside the impact area. They answered yes.

After searching an hour for the exact location of the demo range, the officer-in-charge (OIC) and the range-safety officer (RSO) agreed on a location. They quickly got to work because they had 845 pounds of explosives to detonate.

For the first two demolition shots, the unit inserted C4 into two engineering stakes, forming two expedient bangalore torpedoes. They detonated the improvised devices and blew several strands of concertina wire into pieces. Leaving the concertina wire and its fragments on the ground, they began the set-up for the last shots. The remaining C4 was to be fired as satchel charges in two shots, with a 30-second delay between each.

At this point, the instructors told the students if they wanted to go into the impact area to see and feel the blast, this would be their opportunity to do so. Assured by the instructors that they would be safe, eight of the 20 students moved to within 64 feet of the explosives, wearing their helmets, flaks and earplugs. Eagerly, they lay on the ground and waited to see and feel the blast.

The first shot detonated, sending shrapnel and debris flying and hit two PFCs. Keeping their wits about them, the two kept their heads down until the next detonation was finished. Shrapnel tore into one of the PFC's right shoulder, while the other PFC suffered a bruised arm from flying debris. A corpsman was on the scene and treated them before sending the shrapnel victim to a hospital.

How could this have happened? To begin with, the RSO and OIC were uncertain about the exact location of the range. Also, they were unaware of the requirement to keep personnel in the nearby bunkers when conducting open blasts. Instead, they placed their Marines behind a berm, which they thought was safe but was within the danger zone.

The range regulations prohibited personnel from directly viewing blasts. Instead of following the rules, the RSO decided to rely mostly on his experience. He allowed eight students to position themselves 64 feet from the explosion. Per the order¹ and field manual², the students should have been no closer than 1,020 feet to the explosives, not 64 feet. To make matters worse, some of the Marines weren't wearing their blouses and hearing protection.

This was an open blast on flat ground where wood pallets and metal cans were piled atop 40 pounds of C4. Adding wood and metal to the explosive was a dangerous decision that could have led to more severe injuries or death. Don't forget the leftover concertina wire and its fragments that remained from the first blast.

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The OIC of the range was a motor transport maintenance officer who didn't have the knowledge and experience in working with demolitions. As a result, he relied heavily on the advice of his RSO, a gunnery sergeant, who was a combat engineer and wasn't following the rules to start with.

The PFCs didn't know to call cease-fire after being struck with shrapnel. Why? No one explained to the students that they could call a cease-fire in the event they saw a dangerous situation. The unit explained that prior to the demo training they were busy with repairing vehicles and camp setup, thus forgetting to give a safety brief.

It's doubtful whether a safety brief would have made a difference in this case. When you have a cavalier person like the RSO, in charge, how thorough and effective would you expect the brief to be?

Effective training begins with a leader who takes prudent risks and abides by the rules that are meant to keep him and his Marines injury-free during demo training. After reading this story, I'm sure you'll agree that cavalier leadership should be left to the actors and stuntmen in the movies. Despite what we see on the screen, even the stuntmen take precautions because they can't afford to be reckless, and neither can we. 🌟

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¹MCO 3570.1A Policies and Procedures for Firing Ammunition for Training, Target Practice, and Combat

²FM 5-25 Explosives and Demolitions

Photograph by TSgt. James D. Mossman