

The Fauld Explosion 1944

The RAF Fauld explosion, or as it is known locally, "***The day the dump went up***", was a military accident in WWII which occurred at 11:13 am on Monday, 27 November 1944 at the RAF No. 21 Maintenance Unit (21 MU) underground munition storage depot at Fauld, Staffordshire, England. A calculated 3,522 tons of munitions exploded and it was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history and the largest to occur on UK soil.



The munitions were mainly high explosive (HE) bombs but included a variety of other munitions. The resulting crater, 100 yards (91m) deep and 250 yards (230m) wide, is still visible just south of Fauld, to the East of Hanbury.

The cause of the disaster was not made public at the time. RAF 21 MU was operated by RAF personnel, civilian staff and Italian 'co-operators'¹ whose work was looked on very favourably by the RAF despite local concerns.

The 1974 Inquiry found the cause of the explosion was Leading Aircraftsman Bailey breaching regulations. He was seen, underground, chiselling out the Composite Exploder (CE) from the exploder pocket of a bomb using a brass chisel instead of a wooden batten. Any bombs found to have CE still in them when they came underground should have been returned to the surface to have the CE removed safely on the surface, and not with a brass chisel.

Effects

Two huge explosions were witnessed at No. 21 MU on 27 November 1944 at 11:13 hours. Eyewitnesses reported seeing two distinct columns of black smoke in the form of a mushroom cloud ascending several thousand feet and saw a blaze at the foot of the column. According to the Commanding Officer of 21 M.U. (Group Captain Storrar) a dump of incendiary bombs caught fire and was brought under control by the Fire Service without damage or casualties.

Upper Castle Hayes farm completely disappeared and Messrs. Peter Ford's lime and gypsum works to the north of the village and Purse cottages were completely demolished. A nearby reservoir containing 450,000 cu metres of water was obliterated and flooding destroyed the lime works. Hanbury Fields Farm, Hare Holes Farm and also Croft Farm with adjacent cottages were all extensively damaged. Debris damaged property up to $\frac{3}{4}$ mile (1.2 km) away including The Cock Inn and other buildings in Hanbury village.

It was calculated that 3,522 tons of munitions exploded but rock pillars between No 3 and No. 4 sections held and prevented a further 23,000 tons exploding. The unexploded munitions were later recovered in a long and dangerous operation and were stored above ground at what was then RAF Tatenhill.

¹ *Italy had surrendered at this point in the war and was now an ally. The former Italian prisoners were now referred to as co-operators and worked voluntarily at Fauld.*

Casualties

The official report said that 70 were killed. 18 of whom were missing:

- 57 civilians
- 7 RAF
- 6 Italian Co-operators¹

Also 200 cattle were killed by the explosion. Some live cattle were removed from the vicinity but were found dead the following morning from shock.

Commemoration

There are Memorials to the victims at:

- The National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, Staffordshire, just off the A38 12 miles/20 km (20 minutes) from Hanbury - DE13 7AR
- The Fauld Crater (see 'Visiting' below)
- British Gypsum Fauld (DE13 9HT - on the right at the entrance)

Aftermath

Much of the storage facility was destroyed by the explosion, but the site itself continued to be used by the RAF for munitions storage until 1966, when No. 21 MU was disbanded. Following France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated military structure in 1966, the site was used by the US Army, between 1967 and 1973, to store US ammunition previously stored in France.

By 1979 the crater was fenced off and the area is now covered with over 150 species of trees and other flora. The area is restricted as a significant amount of explosives are still buried deep in the site; the UK government has deemed their removal unfeasible on the grounds of cost.

Visiting the Fauld Crater

Visitors can walk to the Fauld crater and to the Memorial from the Cock Inn in Hanbury. If you are taking refreshments at the Cock Inn, Hanbury (DE13 8TD), ask the staff and they will probably let you leave your car in the car park.

Further Reading

This leaflet was written by Andricks Research Group (ARG) in September 2020 based on the 2019 Fauld 75 Exhibition. It provides an introduction to the explosion at RAF 21 MU in November 1944 but for further reading two excellent books are available:

The Fauld Disaster - 27 November 1944, Nick McCamley, an excellent technical account of what happened, when and why, comprehensively illustrated.

Voices from the Explosion: RAF Fauld, Valerie Hardy, provides accounts from those who were there.

Further Information

For further information or more copies of this leaflet please contact ARG – Rick & Jane Nuth – info@andricks.co.uk – 01283 810 166

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