

Desert blast

Photography and words by Simon Roberts



"No rules, no regulations, just things that go bang in the night"

- Rex Harrel

Ken, a retired Delta Airlines pilot. He shows me another snapshot in which he is holding a flame-thrower spraying a thirty-foot jet of fire streaking across the sky. Ken obviously wasn't going to spend the rest of his days on a quiet golf course.

I was in Quartzsite, shooting a photo essay on Snowbirds – elderly Americans who head south seeking the winter sun. After taking Ken's portrait, he invited me into his mobile home for a drink. It was only natural for him to let me see his holiday snaps. Desert Blast was intriguing. "How do I get invited?" I asked Ken.

"Forget it son, there are only 200 tickets, and at least 10,000 applicants. All I can do is give you the website address you can write to and I'll put in a good word with the organiser, Bob Lazar."

Bob Lazar is a forty-year-old pyrotechnics expert who started going to the Nevada desert thirteen years ago to detonate bombs with his friends. And the idea for Desert Blast was born. "As the thing started to grow," Lazar recalls, "we trained more people in assembling shells and rockets." The beauty of the location, he stresses, is that "You can't burn down the desert."

Initially, I thought it was all a bit of a jape. Lazar sounded like an eccentric and further research revealed a distinctly chequered personal history. Best known for his work on sensitive U.S. government projects at the Area 51 complex, Lazar claims to have worked on "hovering, disc-shaped aircraft". Since going public about his work as a senior staff physicist at Area 51, he has had death threats and actual assassination attempts. Someone has even erased his hospital, birth records, college transcripts, and employment records. Lazar now earns a living from a variety of private endeavours. He refuses to be photographed for fear of being identified.

Unsurprisingly, he was almost impossible to track down. I finally reached him by phone, two days before Desert Blast. "Sure, you can come," he said. I was on the next plane to Las Vegas.

Las Vegas, Nevada, 7am Saturday, 26 May 1999

Ken and his two friends, Rex Harrell, a cotton farmer from Kansas, and Chuck Johnson, a pyrotechnician from Salt Lake City, meet me at my hotel. Using the map which was faxed to Ken the day before, we follow the directions out of Las Vegas: "Take the freeway heading north for forty-five miles. Exit at junction twelve, go under the freeway and follow the small road south running parallel. After about _ miles, you'll see a dirt track off to your right. Take this and head due west for seven miles. Then just follow the flames!"

We stop some distance from the gathering and someone hands me a piece of paper headed "Assumption of the Risk, (AKA don't come crying to us). Warning! Desert Blast is dangerous." It continues, "There are inherent risks associated with attending this event. These include, but are not limited to: death, dismemberment, blindness or other severe injury, etc." This was my indemnity form to be signed before I was allowed any further. Blithely, I sign with a flourish, and only begin to think more carefully when I read the rules:

1. If you see somebody running, make sure you run in the same direction as quick as they are!
2. No safety officials or law-enforcement officers allowed. No pets or kids under twenty-one.
3. There will be large fireworks, explosions, loud noises, unsafe conditions and other dangerous things like random gunfire and intoxicated people with flame-throwers. If these things frighten you, you're at the wrong party.
4. Your safety is your own problem. No one has been hurt in the past nine years, and it would be nice if we could keep it that way. If you get hurt, or if the paint gets burnt off your car, the only one responsible will be you.
5. You will be in the desert in the height of summer. If you don't bring food and water, you will die.
6. Do not attempt to start a conversation with Bob Lazar about UFOs, it may endanger your life.

energy chemicals. In other words, very big, very loud explosives, I am transfixed.

I look curiously at the participants, the most extraordinary revellers at a truly bizarre party. They're pyromaniacs, experts from military and movie backgrounds. Others are fire-loving enthusiasts for whom blowing things up is a favourite extra-curricular activity. As you might expect, many of them are imaginative, unconventional and thrill-seeking. Wally Glenn, who is also known as Pyro Boy, sets himself ablaze during a two-minute dance. The fifty fireworks he has strapped to himself and ignited leave him with just "minor burns".

This is a chance for the attendees to show off their creations without any restrictions, an opportunity to demonstrate new tricks and experiment with new ingredients. Some have already spent many months building fireworks and bombs, stockpiling dynamite and flash powder ready for this firework orgy.

Naturally, all share "flash stories" – garrulously telling tales of their biggest explosions. The war wounds they've received are barely conceivable and the numerous close calls with large amounts of dynamite inevitably border on the fantastical. But then, some of the highlights of Desert Blast are fantastical, including home-made high powered/high altitude rockets, 200 rocket propelled parachute flares, red, white, and blue six-inch star shells and aerial salutes and flame-throwers. In general, I'm doing well, with only one crucial

Oversight: I forgot my earplugs. After a particularly thunderous detonation, my ears ring ominously and don't cease their tinny reverberations for another two weeks.

On an entertainingly pastoral note, Desert Blast is a place for learning. It caters for the novice with workshops where you can prepare your own combustible device under the supervision of technical experts. Their home-made creations read like a bizarre chemical menu for the pyromaniac diner: chrysanthemum shells (made from black powder, rice kernels and magnesium), confetti bombs, gas bombs with magnesium, scratch bombs and, the favourite of all Desert Blasters, the kinny pack or ANFOs, ammonium nitrate and fuel oil. Ingredients range from potassium perchlorate, oxysalicylate and gasoline to titanium, boron and foamite.

For me, the *pièce de résistance* was Desert Fusion, a 4,000 pound ammonium nitrate rocket fuel ignited bomb which creates a huge mushroom cloud and a "flaming wall of death" reaching 300 feet into the air. I was standing sixty metres away and the heat of the explosion buffeted me in the face. The heat was so intense that it seemed to rise up from the earth and engulf everything in its trajectory.

The party will stop because the sun comes up. At 4am the true devotees are still attempting to light 2,000 pounds of magnesium, without success, seeking that one final thrill. At 7am, the desert floor is scorched black, still billowing smoke, and coughing up dying flames. By 9am the clear-up operation begins as all debris, shells, machine gun cartridges and exploded dynamite sticks are packed into bin liners and thrown in the back of vans. The desert blasters must leave no trace of their "visit", despite reports from passing motorists about unexplained multicoloured explosions and a complaint from Nellis U.S. Air Force Base which claims that air clearance had not been given to fire rockets, some of which reached as high as 9,000 feet and appeared on the base's radar screens. This is the panache and the daredevilry of Desert Blast. §





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