

The following report indicates the consequences of storing large amounts of ammunition on one single site such as Ridgewell Airfield.

No. 21 Maintenance Unit, RAF Fauld.

This explosion was a military accident that occurred at 11:11 am on Monday, 27 November 1944 at the munitions storage depot at Fauld in Staffordshire. It was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history and the largest on UK soil.

Between 3,900 and 4,400 tons of high explosive ordnance, detonated.

Eyewitnesses reported seeing two distinct columns of black smoke in the form of a mushroom cloud ascending several thousand feet, and a blaze at the foot of the column. According to the Commanding Officer of 21 MU, an open dump of incendiary bombs caught fire and it was allowed to burn itself out without damage or casualties.

Debris and damage occurred to all property within a circle of the crater extending for 1,420 yards (1.3Km). 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. The lime works were destroyed by the flooding after a nearby reservoir containing 450,000 cubic metres (16,000,000 cu ft) of water was obliterated as a result of the shock wave from the explosion.

The crater was 300 yards by 233 yards in length and 100 feet deep, covering 12 acres.

The exact death toll was not known, but it's believed between 70 and 90 people died in the explosion and the resulting catastrophic flood. An accurate figure was never established.

The cause of the disaster was not made clear at the time. There had been staff shortages and more importantly, a senior management position had remained empty for a year, together with 189 inexperienced Italian prisoners of war who were working at the facility at the time of the accident.

A public inquiry held soon after the disaster was shrouded in secrecy with the findings not being released until 1974, the statutory 30-year period imposed by defence regulations.



An eyewitness testified at the inquiry, that he had seen an unskilled worker using brass chisels, in direct contravention of the regulations in force.

With this compelling evidence, a full report was finally made public concluding:

“The cause of the explosion was probably an unskilled worker removing a detonator from a live bomb using a brass chisel, rather than a wooden mallet, resulting in sparks.”

Left:- The total devastation of the blast area