

Ka-Booom!!

The only thing that separates the men from the boys is the amount of dynamite in their toys.

Wired Magazine, Dec. 1994

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"All clear and ready." Bob Lazar's voice echoes through several hand-held radios.

A hush falls on the crowd of people gathered on one side of this barren, dry lake bed in the middle of Absolutely Nowhere, Nevada. The sun slides behind the mountains and all eyes train on a smoldering pile way out in the distance. Feathers of gray smoke silently snake their way up into the sky.

"She's goin'!" Jim Tagliani bellows.

"Awe-some!"

"Holy shit!"

Seconds later, a deafening explosion cracks the silence of the desert at dusk. Tiny plumes mushroom into a massive furling cloud of black smoke. Red hot flames seethe at the cloud's core. From the outer edges, minute, strobe-like particles fly out and die down on the parched mud floor.

Thummmmbpff! From a launching tube on another part of the lake crater, a shell soars high up into the air and bursts into an array of magenta and glitter that sparkles up the sky. "Whoooo-hoooo!" Laura Godel is exuberant. "That's beautiful," chimes in Linda Wilson.

Meanwhile, Jim Tagliani has strapped a moaning, flame-throwing static Ramjet to his back and is zipping by the crowd on roller skates. In another part of this parched mud arena, Lew Godel takes his position, belly down, face to the dirt, and hits a launch button. A stealth black rocket emblazoned with the letters D-E-S-E-R-T B-L-A-S-T lifts off and soars up to Mach 1. It may be soaring still.

There's a time and place for everything in this petrochemical world in which we live. There's a time to reap and a time to sow. A time to take massive amounts of bullshit, and a time to vent it all and party down in a gaseous, dynamite celebration of independence. On this particular evening in May, it's time to vent.

Every year since 1987, on a secret date and at a secret location, a group of pyrotechnics wizards stage an annual outlaw gathering out in the desert outback of Nevada. In 1991, patriotically inspired by Desert Storm, the organizers dubbed the event Desert Blast. The group's unwritten code: Bigger and Better Fun through Chemistry and Physics.

"Desert Blast is a celebration of the things an American should be able to do," explains one veteran, who requested anonymity. "And it's about forgetting and having fun, kind of like, Let's be a kid again."

"Yeah," echoes another attendee, "and not have *anyone* tell you to shut up!"

Humbly billed as "the largest outlaw fireworks show in the West," Desert Blast is probably the largest outlaw fireworks show in the world. The actual detonation date changes from year to year, as does the location. It's an exclusive affair. As the video invites proclaim: "If you don't know where it is, you're not invited." But for those who are honored with an

invitation or those who know somebody who knows somebody who has directions, Desert Blast - or DB, as regulars call it - is the party to end all parties, a party that gives you a place to rant and something to really rave about. In essence it's a night of contained anarchy. The Woodstock of Pyrotechnics.

Desert Blast is the brainchild of Bob Lazar - by day a freelance scientist and businessman - and Jim Tagliani, who pays the bills by installing and programming computers for Indian bingo parlors. As one DB adage goes: Bob builds it; Jim tries it out.

For Lazar, the flame for fireworks was kindled during his youth on Long Island, New York. He spent his summers hanging around several local families who made professional fireworks. "Because I was young, they wouldn't let me touch anything flammable," he remembers. "But I would help tie strings and stuff." Years later, Lazar decided to figure it out for himself.

Lazar's affinity for things pyro slept, latent for nearly two decades of school and work, but in the early '80s, he hooked up with Tagliani, a natural-horn daredevil and neighbor in Woodland Hills, California. It was an instant affinity: both were blinded by science. Lazar was working at Fairchild Xincom, he says, a now-defunct electronics firm, where he recommended Tagliani for a technician position there, and the friendship grew. Later, driving through LA one day, the two passed an acquaintance waving a pyrotechnics device. The guy invited them to a gathering of motorcycle freaks being held in a dry lake bed out near El Mirage, California. There, says Lazar, biker pyrotechnicians hosted an explosive fire fest, until their fun was eventually quashed by Bureau of Land Management officers.



According to Lazar's account, he later moved on to Los Alamos National Laboratories in New Mexico, but like many a bomb crazed scientist, he felt stifled there. So in 1985, he headed for Las Vegas, Nevada. Not long after, Tagliani joined him in the City of Sin. The fireworks flame re-ignited in Lazar and Tagliani, and so they decided to uncover the secrets of pyrotechnics, and put one of Nevada's numerous dry lake beds to use. Their first two desert shows were small, drawing 50 to 75 friends. Lazar personally manufactured all of the fireworks.

But as the two attempted to outdo their work each successive year, planning and executing their private parties became a time-consuming task. In 1988, Lazar enlisted a troop of capable friends. United by chemistry, physics, and electronics, they came from all walks of life and all kinds of day jobs. NASA controllers and electronics specialists. Computer programmers and technicians. Propulsion systems experts and car mechanics. Even real estate appraisers and contractors. Together, they formed the core creation team of Desert Blast.

It takes at least three months and close to US\$6,000 to manufacture all of the festive accouterments for the one-night show. "It really is a team effort," says Lazar. "And now there are pyrotechnics conventions that we attend." During the year, the pyro-cohorts meet in their off-hours in a nondescript, concrete reinforced building on private land well outside the city limits of Las Vegas. There, they mix chemicals, roll stars, build rockets, design Sky Cams, and do whatever else seems appropriate and necessary.

As the time nears each year, Linda (aka Crouton) Wilson, Lazar's girlfriend of four years, serves as Desert Blast's assistant coordinator. Laura Godel helps Lazar finesse the electronic devices, while her husband, Lew Godel joins Lazar in the creation and supervision of all rocketry. Dan Stegemann serves as general device assembler, while Shelly Ball, Tagliani's girlfriend, manufactures Teddy, the sacrificial bear whose destruction marks the event's climax.

Word about Desert Blast spread quickly. By 1990, Lazar and Tagliani had learned one thing: if you launch it, fire it, or blow it up, they will come. Hundreds of uninvited spectators appeared from far and wide to witness the show. In 1992, the assemblage swelled to more than 450 people. "And sometimes they'd review the show; give us *shit* if something wasn't exactly perfect," recalls Gene Huff, who appraises real estate when he's not mixing chemicals and rolling stars.

"It was starting to get out of hand," Lazar sighs.

Lazar's notoriety in the UFO underground no doubt had a lot to do with that. In March 1989, Lazar, fearing for his life, publicly claimed, on KLAS-TV, the Las Vegas CBS affiliate, that he had just been released from a top-secret program, Project Galileo, in which he helped back-engineer the propulsion system of one of nine extraterrestrial craft being stored on the Nellis Gunnery and Bombing Range in Nevada. Overwhelmed with requests for interviews, which he "loathes," plagued with "tons of mail," and adamant about not joining the "crazies" on the UFO or talk-show circuit, Lazar quelled the deluge by producing, with Huff, a videotape about his alleged experience, something that has made him a veritable icon in the UFO haunts of cyberspace.

But that is another story. Commandment Number One at Desert Blast: Thou shalt not talk of UFOs. Nevertheless, "Excerpts From The Government Bible" (otherwise known as the Lazar Tape) has made Lazar a popular guy and someone a whole lot of people want to hang with.

For the last two years, Lazar has diligently faxed out wrong directions and dates to lose a few of the uninvited guests and general pains in the ass, not to mention unwanted law-enforcement types. Desert Blast does not exactly conform to federal regulations.

"Actually, while we were out testing some shells one day, a cop did show up," says Lazar. "He saw what we were doing and just said, 'Cool. Mind if I watch?'"

On Saturday, May 21, the Desert Blast countdown digital clock ticks down to 0:00 at the secret rendezvous location, and final loading begins. Everything has already been packed for transport: More than 400 shells; a single display cart of 100 2-1/2-inch star shells and reports; the giant, double-pinwheel display; bunches of small black-powder rockets with titanium and reports; strobe rockets; various sizes of salutes (including several M-800s); six stealth-black rockets, complete with nose cones and tails; four large barrels of magnesium; 20 gallons of fuel for the gas bombs; propane torches; launching tubes; boxes of extra fuse and wiring; five weather balloons; hardware; a viewing tower made from steel scaffolding; a sound system; boxes of Day-Glo Cyalume sticks and rope; coolers packed with food and water; cameras; and various other items. At around 2:30 p.m., a caravan of some 20 cars, trucks, trailers, and recreation vehicles leaves the highway and begins winding its way through desert terrain down an unmarked dirt road and onto this year's chosen dry lake bed. There, they stagger into a parking line that stretches out along one side, and everyone begins to set up camp.

At center stage, on the lake crater, the first mortar is launched. It soars more than 800 feet into the sky. As it bursts, an American flag on a tiny parachute patriotically unfurls and flaps across the desert on the air currents. DB VIII has begun.

At around 4:30 p.m., Lazar fuels up the Jet car, dons his fire-retardant jacket and crash helmet, and climbs in. The Jetcar, like your basic dragsters, is comprised of a chromoly steel frame. It's about 32-feet long and its jet engine - originally designed for the Navy's first supersonic fighter - makes the car look not so much futuristic as absurd. A 30-foot flame shoots out the back and the shrill, decibel-defying noise makes you feel as if you've been stranded out on an Air Force tarmac facing the wrong direction. As he rolls in for a pit stop, the afterburner flame swells and shoots out. "Hey! He's on *fire*!" shouts an uninitiated spectator.

Not to worry. Onto bigger things. It's Super Bomb time. Materials are placed, and the announcement is made. Within seconds, another deafening explosion shatters the earth, this one erupting into an ominous, deep-black, almost-mushroom cloud, and has the crowd on its feet, cheering maniacally. Over on the highway, several miles away, traffic has stopped, and spectators watch in a state of awe or disbelief. Maybe they think they're watching some sort of weird military experiment. But the Desert Blast participants aren't self-conscious. "There is just nothing more exciting than totally blowing something up - and then feeling the shock wave go through you," says Farhat. "You can just stand and watch... and you feel like you've *screamed*. It's weird. Really weird. But it feels so *good*."

Out on the rocket pad, Lazar and Lew (aka The Viking) Godel are preparing the test launch. Godel is the sort who enjoys living wildly. "This is a unique guy," Lazar explains, as Godel hunkers down on the ground near the 5-foot-tall stealth-black rocket that stands majestically against the backdrop of the desert. "He killed a deer once, and then spread the blood all over himself, or whatever it is the Vikings do. Then he took the heart out and *ate* it."

As night falls, an intermittent stream of cars makes its way down the unmarked road to witness the show, and soon onlookers drape themselves in Day-Glo. It's time for the day's peak, the ultimate fireworks display.

Out at the launching area, youthful newcomer, Jeff Carbary, assumes the task of overseeing the mortars and the main fireworks begin. Before launch, Carbary details the make of each shell for the benefit of the pyro connoisseurs, the gathered crowd of Those Fascinated by Fire. One after another, the fireworks burst in full radiance against the sky, and the audience murmurs its appreciation in hushed and almost reverent uuuhhhs and aaahhhs.

Finally, it's time to blow up Teddy, a tradition at Desert Blast. Teddy originally came from Tagliani's home Halloween yard art. He and Ball initially decided to take Teddy to DB as a sort of mascot. "At first, we used to let him just hang around," recalls Shelly Ball. "But, we needed a goal - something to destroy, and we realized, 'Hey, we can shoot Teddy.'" So, Teddy quickly became a target, replacing the Saddam Hussein paper targets on the shooting range. "We'd put beer bottles or Coke cans in his pockets; then we graduated to M-80s, then M-800s," says Ball. "It was a challenge to see who could shoot his pockets first. Ultimately, we'd blow his arms off, then maybe a leg or two. But Teddy was still left, more or less."

The next year, they decided instead to just put Teddy on a Coors Party Ball gas bomb and blow him to bits. That approach, or a similar concept, has stuck.

As the sun rises over the mountains, it's cleanup time for Lazar and Tagliani and the rest of the core DB team. They rise, scouring the desert for any remaining debris, bagging it for disposal. All the escaped dirt is shoveled back into the holes, and the dry lake bed is restored to its original condition. By 10 a.m., all tents have been dismantled and all waste discreetly stored in the back of trucks or car trunks. There are virtually no signs that any thing unusual took place here - no signs that just hours before, nearly 200 people had gathered for a night of living dangerously. As the sun begins to bake the valley, the DB caravan heads out, back to civilization for another year.

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