



Mines Safety Bulletin No. 75

Date: 10 January 2006

Subject: Fire and explosion in a working party magazine

This bulletin is issued following extensive investigation, technical review and test-work relating to a fire and subsequent explosion that occurred in a working party explosives magazine underground at a mine with sulphide mineralisation during 2005.

Incident

At about 5.45 am, a fire behind the locked gates of a working party magazine was observed by underground personnel who were passing the area. Attempts were made to put out the fire using Dry Chemical Powder (DCP) fire extinguishers, but these attempts were unsuccessful.

It was estimated that in excess of six tonnes of explosives and between 1,500 and 3,000 detonators were stored in the working party magazine at the time of the fire.

Five people were able to escape from the mine through the decline portal entrance while a further 22 personnel, who were unable to use this means of egress, travelled to fresh-air bases and refuge chambers underground where they were all accounted for. Once accounted for, the personnel were moved to the shaft plat in preparation for evacuation from the mine.

Delays occurred in evacuating personnel through the shaft, as it was in transition from shaft sinking to equipping the production winding system. This necessitated the completion of a risk analysis so that the sinking kibble could be safely used for the evacuation of personnel.

About two hours after the fire was identified an explosion occurred which knocked out the underground communications. The explosion also stopped two surface fans for a brief period until they could be restarted.

Injuries

Four people in the vicinity of the working party magazine, who attempted to fight the fire, suffered smoke inhalation. No personnel suffered any serious injuries during the emergency evacuation from underground. The potential for serious consequences is, however, obvious.

Causes

The cause of the ignition in the magazine was not determined with certainty due to the damage sustained. However, the following contributory factors were evident as a result of investigation, technical review and testing:

- Reactive mineralisation, containing sulphide material including pyrite and chalcopyrite, was present in the rock in which the magazine was excavated. Marcasite was also identified — a material that could react with ammonium nitrate in the explosive stored in the magazine and cause self-ignition as a result of the chemical reaction.
- ANFO was known to have spilled in the magazine prior to the incident. ANFO is known to interact with sulphides to cause an exothermic reaction. The chemical reaction may have a long induction period with little observable temperature increase. However, once sufficient catalysing species have built up, the reaction rate increases rapidly, generating sufficient heat to cause self-ignition.
- Ammonium nitrate is also an oxidising agent, which evolves its own oxygen during chemical reaction. This made it impossible for the dry powder fire extinguishers to smother the fire. Water application is the primary suppression method recommended in explosives manufacturers' material safety data sheets.
- A number of empty 500 kg bulk ANFO bags were allowed to accumulate in the magazine, stacked in close proximity to full ANFO bags. This would have provided an additional fuel source and assisted in the propagation of the fire.
- A number of personnel authorised to enter the working party magazine were found to be smokers and routinely carried cigarettes and lighters into the magazine. However, there was no evidence from witness statements or previous inspections and audits that personnel had been smoking inside or in the vicinity of the magazine immediately prior to the incident.
- The working party magazine was being utilised to supply several jumbo development headings concurrently. Consequently, a quantity of explosives in excess of six tonnes was being stored in one area for this purpose.
- There was no regular shift supervisory inspection carried out in the working party magazine on the shift the incident took place or on the shifts immediately prior to the incident.
- The explosives management plan for the mine did not detail the storage requirements mandated by legislation and regulation.
- The explosive management plan required weekly contractor inspections and monthly principal employer audits of magazines. Records revealed that the inspections and audits were not being carried out at this frequency.
- Dry chemical powder fire extinguishers were provided both inside and outside of the locked gates of the magazine. Personnel were not able to use these extinguishers due to their proximity to the fire. Fire extinguishers were sourced from mobile equipment to fight the fire.
- There was no water hose provided outside the locked magazine. The water hose inside the magazine could not be utilised when fighting the fire as the smoke had become too intense by the time the gate was unlocked.
- The area was force ventilated using a compressed air fan. The direction of the ventilation hampered attempts to put out the fire.

Consequences

- Personnel involved in fighting the fire suffered from smoke inhalation. They did not don their self rescuers but were able to quickly reach fresh air in the main decline after their attempts to extinguish the fire failed.
- The fire and subsequent explosion caused significant damage to services, ventilation doors and machinery up to a kilometre away. Communications were lost underground as a result of damage to the leaky feeder during the explosion. Communications were re-established after half an hour using hand held line-of-sight two way radios, which were brought down the shaft.
- The location of the working party magazine and the siting of force ventilation fans serving an adjacent, blind incline development heading were such that a jumbo operator wearing a self-rescuer had to

retreat about one kilometre through smoke towards the entrance to the heading, which was directly opposite the magazine where the fire and subsequent explosion took place. The person was retrieved by the brave action of a fitter who returned underground in a light vehicle and had to pass close by the magazine on two occasions to effect the rescue.

Comment

- The working party magazine concept, historically, was created to provide for local storage of small quantities of explosives and detonators for the use of one airleg miner or a small group working in a particular area.
- With the advent of jumbo development, the quantities stored in working party magazines have generally increased from a nominal quantity of about 100–200 kg up to quantities in excess of one tonne. Where dedicated jumbo development crews and charge up crews are established, the quantities of explosives and detonators required to serve the multiple areas being developed, can lead (without appropriate controls) to even greater tonnages being stored in a so-called working party magazine. The regulatory provisions, as they were originally developed, did not envisage catering for the levels of usage occurring today.
- A working party magazine should only be utilised to provide small quantities of explosive for an individual or a small work group, and the concept should not be used for the large-scale storage and supply of explosives to service extensive jumbo development or multiple stope face blasting. Large quantities of explosives needed for such working methods should be supplied from a main magazine underground or directly from a surface magazine if this is feasible.

Preventative action

- Mines with reactive sulphide orebodies or stringers should develop a comprehensive management plan to adequately deal with the hazards potentially associated with reactive ground:
 - The geology should be examined on a regular basis to determine the potential for the presence of reactive ground.
 - A geological plan should be maintained identifying areas where sulphides or reactive ground is present.
 - Explosives sensitive to reactive ground should not be used or stored in those areas identified as having reactive ground present. Comprehensive inspections and risk assessments should be completed to affirm that explosive storage areas are free from the presence of sulphide material or reactive ground.
 - Specialised inhibited explosives designed for use in reactive ground should be sourced and appropriately used where sulphide material or reactive ground may present a hazard.
 - Inspection, monitoring and suppression methods should be implemented to mitigate or remove the potential hazards associated with reactive ground, such as sulphide dust explosions or spontaneous combustion catalysed by extraneous materials such as explosives or fuels.
- A comprehensive procedure for the storage, transport and usage of explosives needs to be developed for each operation, in accordance with legislation, regulatory provisions and applicable standards.
- The statutorily appointed managers who have the daily control and supervision of the mine (Registered Manager and Underground Manager) need to ensure that a system is established to verify that shift inspections are being completed by supervisory staff in all working areas underground, including explosive magazines in accordance with regulations 3.18 and 3.21.
- The statutorily appointed managers who have the daily control and supervision of the mine (Registered Manager and Underground Manager) need to ensure that a system is in place to verify that inspections and audits laid down in company procedures are being completed at the prescribed frequency.

- A procedure to deal with the accumulation and removal of empty ANFO bags or spillage in an explosives magazine needs to be included as part of the storage requirements in any explosives management plan. Prior to removal from the mine once empty, the ANFO bags should be cleaned and stored outside the magazine and a safe distance from the explosives to reduce the fire risk hazard. All spillage should be cleaned up and removed immediately.
- Procedures should be developed to ensure that no personnel smoke or take contraband (e.g. lighters, matches, mobile phones, radio transmitters) inside the detonator or explosive magazines. This should be reinforced at periodic retraining sessions for personnel with access to explosives.
- A water deluge system and fire hoses should be provided at all storage areas where large quantities of explosives, in particular ANFO, are stored. The activation mechanism for the water deluge system should preferably be automatic or otherwise should be accessible from outside the locked magazine. Fire hoses and water should also be similarly installed outside the entrance to magazines.
- Fire extinguishers need to be placed a safe distance from the explosive storage area so they can be safely utilised in an emergency.
- Working party magazines need to be sited clear of entrances to currently working development headings and their air intakes so that, in the event of a fire, personnel can retreat to safety without being exposed to the hazards potentially arising from a fire or explosion associated with the magazine.
- Back up communications in the form of a direct telephone system underground should be considered in addition to any leaky feeder system. The installation of the back up communication should be such that it is connected via a separate route to avoid both sets of communications being damaged by a fire or explosion in any one area.
- Personnel need to be adequately trained, retrained and regularly reminded of the importance of donning self-rescuers where a fire is evident underground. Once donned, personnel should not attempt to fight the fire but should immediately evacuate the area and proceed to a fresh-air base or refuge.

Further guidance

The Department has previously issued *Safety Bulletin No. 1: Sulphide Dust Explosion Hazard and a Guideline on the Safety Management of Underground Combustible Sulphide Dust*, which mine operators should review and implement where a similar hazard is evident. Both documents are available on the Department's website at www.docep.wa.gov.au/ResourcesSafety in the mining section, under guidance material and publications.

Mines should also conform to Australian Standard AS 2187.1:1998 — Explosives Storage Transport and Use — Part 1 in Appendix H, which recommends in part that magazines should be located clear of sources of sulphide dust.

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