The Hurt-Locker School

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Under an exhaust hood shielded by safety glass in a research laboratory, a U.S. Marine Corps sergeant named Alvin puts three white crystals, each the size of a sea-salt grain, into a piece of foil crimped like a cupcake liner. It's Day 2 of the Los Alamos National Laboratory Advanced Homemade Explosives Course. Two other marines and an airman, all Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technicians, crowd around. Alvin clicks-on a disposable gas lighter and waves the flame back and forth below the foil for a few seconds…

Bang!

A bright blue flame flashes off the sample. Everybody jumps, except instructor Virginia Manner, a Los Alamos staff scientist in the High Explosives Science and Technology group. None of the EOD techs—all experienced with explosives—expected this batch to go off like that.

"Whoa!" says Devin, another marine sergeant. "I wasn't ready for that!"

"That was freaking *awesome*!" Alvin says.

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