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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

NARRATIVE SUMMARIES OF ACCIDENTS
INVOLVING U.S. NUCLEAR WEAPONS
1950-1980

Attached are unclassified summaries describing the circumstances surrounding 32 accidents involving nuclear weapons. Also attached is the Department of Defense (DOD)/Department of Energy (DOE) definition of "accident" used in researching this project.

Twenty-six of these summaries were first released by the Air Force in 1977; another was prepared following the Titan II explosion in Arkansas in September 1980. Those previously-released summaries are marked with a figure "1"; in some cases they include new material made available as a result of more recent research.*

There never has been even a partial inadvertent U.S. nuclear detonation despite the very severe stresses imposed upon the weapons involved in these accidents. All "detonations" reported in the summaries involved conventional high explosives (HE) only. Only two accidents, those at Palomares and Thule, resulted in a widespread dispersal of nuclear materials.

Nuclear weapons are never carried on training flights. Most of the aircraft accidents represented here occurred during logistic/ferry missions or airborne alert flights by Strategic Air Command (SAC) aircraft. Airborne alert was terminated in 1968 because of:

- Accidents, particularly those at Palomares and Thule,
- The rising cost of maintaining a portion of the SAC bomber force constantly on airborne alert, and,
- The advent of a responsive and survivable intercontinental ballistic missile force which relieved the manned bomber force of a part of its more time-sensitive responsibilities. (A portion of the SAC force remains on nuclear ground alert.)

Since the location of a nuclear weapon is classified defense information, it is Department of Defense policy normally neither to confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear weapons at any specific place. In the case of an accident involving nuclear weapons, their presence may or may not be divulged at the time depending upon the possibility of public hazard or alarm. Therefore, in some of the events summarized here, the fact of the presence of nuclear weapons or materials may not have been confirmed at the time. Furthermore, due to diplomatic considerations, it is not possible to specify the location of the accidents that occurred overseas, except for Palomares and Thule.

Most of the weapon systems involved in these accidents are no longer in the active inventory. Those include the B-29, B-36, B-47, B-50, B-58, C-124, F-100 and P-5M aircraft, and the Minuteman I missile.

With some early models of nuclear weapons, it was standard procedure during most operations to keep a capsule of nuclear material separate from the weapon for safety purposes. While a weapon with the capsule removed did contain a quantity of natural (not enriched) uranium with an extremely low level of radioactivity, accidental detonation of the HE element would not cause a nuclear detonation or contamination. More modern designs incorporate improved redundant safety features to insure that a nuclear explosion does not occur as the result of an accident.

This list of accidents was compiled by DOD/DOE researchers during December 1980-January 1981. The researchers reviewed all available records of the military services and DOE, applying current definitions to determine if an event warranted categorization as an accident.

For example, one event not covered by these narratives was included in a "Chronology of Nuclear Accident Statements," released by DOD in 1968:

"March 18, 1963, Titan (I) Missile Burned in Silo near Moses Lake, Washington."

The researchers found, however, that only a small retrorocket on the missile had accidentally fired. The missile and its warhead were not damaged. That event does not warrant inclusion in a list of accidents involving nuclear weapons.

Another event from the 1968 list, involving a U.S. Navy Terrier missile (January 20, 1966; NAS Mayport, Florida) was not considered to be an accident, but has been categorized as a significant incident. In that incident, a nuclear warhead separated from the missile, and fell about eight feet. The warhead was dented; no other damage occurred.

The other events in this list that were also cited in the 1968 "Chronology....." are identified with a figure "2".**

The events outlined in the attached narratives involved operational weapons, nuclear materials, aircraft and/or missiles under control of the U. S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, or a DOE predecessor agency, the Atomic Energy Commission. The U.S. Army has never experienced an event serious enough to warrant inclusion in a list of accidents involving nuclear weapons. The U.S. Marine Corps does not have custody of nuclear weapons in peacetime and has experienced no accidents or significant incidents involving them.

To the best of our knowledge, this list is complete. Reporting requirements varied among the Services, particularly in the earlier period covered by these narratives, so it is possible but not likely that an earlier accident has gone unreported here. All later events, however, have been evaluated and are included if they fall within the established definition of an accident.

Current as of April, 1981

DEFINITION OF AN ACCIDENT

An "accident involving nuclear weapons" is defined as

-An unexpected event involving nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons components that results in any of the following:

--Accidental or unauthorized launching, firing, or use, by U.S. forces or supported allied forces, of a nuclear-capable weapon system which could create the risk of an outbreak of war.

--Nuclear detonation.

--Non-nuclear detonation or burning of a nuclear weapon or radioactive weapon component, including a fully assembled nuclear weapon, an unassembled nuclear weapon, or a radioactive nuclear weapon component.

--Radioactive contamination.

--Seizure, theft, or loss of a nuclear weapon or radioactive nuclear weapon component, including jettisoning.

--Public hazard, actual or implied.

February 13, 1950 / B-36 / Pacific Ocean, off Coast of British Columbia

The B-36 was enroute from Eielson AFB to Carswell AFB on a simulated combat profile mission. The weapon aboard the aircraft had a dummy capsule installed. After six hours of flight, the aircraft developed serious mechanical difficulties, making it necessary to shut down three engines. The aircraft was at 12,000 feet altitude. Icing conditions complicated the emergency and level flight could not be maintained. The aircraft headed out over the Pacific Ocean and dropped the weapon from 8,000 feet. A bright flash occurred on impact, followed by a sound and shock wave. Only the weapon's high explosive material detonated. The aircraft was then flown over Princess Royal Island where the crew bailed out. The aircraft wreckage was later found on Vancouver Island.

* 1

April 11, 1950 / B-29 / Manzano Base, New Mexico

Aircraft departed Kirtland AFB at 9:38 p.m. and crashed into a mountain on Manzano Base approximately three minutes later killing the crew. Detonators were installed in the bomb on board the aircraft. The bomb case was demolished and some high explosive (HE) material burned in the gasoline fire. Other pieces of unburned HE were scattered throughout the wreckage. Four spare detonators in their carrying case were recovered undamaged. There were no contamination or recovery problems. The recovered components of the weapon were returned to the Atomic Energy Commission. Both the weapon and the capsule of nuclear material were on board the aircraft but the capsule was not inserted for safety reasons. A nuclear detonation was not possible.

* 1

July 13, 1950 / B-50 / Lebanon, Ohio

The B-50 was on a training mission from Biggs AFB, Texas. The aircraft was flying at 7,000 feet on a clear day. Aircraft nosed down and flew into the ground killing four officers and twelve airmen. The high explosive portion of the weapon aboard detonated on impact. There was no nuclear capsule aboard the aircraft.

* 1

August 5, 1950 / B-29 / Fairfield Suisun-ABF, California

A B-29 carrying a weapon, but no capsule, experienced two runaway propellers and landing gear retraction difficulties on takeoff from Fairfield-Suisun AFB (now Travis AFB). The aircraft attempted an emergency landing and crashed and burned. The fire was fought for 12-15 minutes before the weapon's high explosive material detonated. Nineteen crew members and rescue personnel were killed in the crash and/or the resulting detonation, including General Travis.

* 1

November 10, 1950 / B-50 / Over Water, outside United States

Because of an in-flight aircraft emergency, a weapon containing no capsule of nuclear material was jettisoned over water from an altitude of 10,500 feet. A high-explosive detonation was observed.

March 10, 1956 / B-47 / Mediterranean Sea

The aircraft was one of a flight of four scheduled for non-stop deployment from MacDill AFB to an overseas air base. Take-off from MacDill and first refueling were normal. The second refueling point was over the Mediterranean Sea. In preparation for this, the flight penetrated solid cloud formation to descend to the refueling level of 14,000 feet. Base of the clouds was 14,500 feet and visibility was poor. The aircraft, carrying two nuclear capsules in carrying cases, never made contact with the tanker.

An extensive search failed to locate any traces of the missing aircraft or crew. No weapons were aboard the aircraft, only two capsules of nuclear weapons material in carrying cases. A nuclear detonation was not possible.

* 1

July 27, 1956 / B-47 / Overseas Base

A B-47 aircraft with no weapons aboard was on a routine training mission making a touch and go landing when the aircraft suddenly went out of control and slid off the runway, crashing into a storage igloo containing several nuclear weapons. The bombs did not burn or detonate. There were no contamination or cleanup problems. The damaged weapons and components were returned to the Atomic Energy Commission. The weapons that were involved were in storage configuration. No capsules of nuclear materials were in the weapons or present in the building.

* 1

May 22, 1957 / B-36 / Kirtland AFB, New Mexico

The aircraft was ferrying a weapon from Biggs AFB, Texas, to Kirtland AFB. At 11:50 a.m. MST, while approaching Kirtland at an altitude of 1,700 feet, the weapon dropped from the bomb bay taking the bomb bay doors with it. Weapon parachutes were deployed but apparently did not fully retard the fall because of the low altitude. The impact point was approximately 4.5 miles south of the Kirtland control tower and .3 miles west of the Sandia Base reservation. The high explosive material detonated, completely destroying the weapon and making a crater approximately 25 feet in diameter and 12 feet deep. Fragments and debris were scattered as far as one mile from the impact point. The release mechanism locking pin was being removed at the time of release. (It was standard procedure at that time that the locking pin be removed during takeoff and landing to allow for emergency jettison of the weapon if necessary.) Recovery and cleanup operations were conducted by Field Command, Armed Forces Special Weapons Project. Radiological survey of the area disclosed no radioactivity beyond the lip of the crater at which point the level was 0.5 milliroentgens. There were no health or safety problems. Both the weapon and capsule were on board the aircraft but the capsule was not inserted for safety reasons. A nuclear detonation was not possible.

* 1

July 28, 1957 / C-124 / Atlantic Ocean

Two weapons were jettisoned from a C-124 aircraft on July 28 off the east coast of the United States. There were three weapons and one nuclear capsule aboard the aircraft at the time. Nuclear components were not installed in the weapons. The C-124 aircraft was enroute from Dover AFB, Delaware when a loss of power from number one and two engines was experienced. Maximum power was applied to the remaining engines; however, level flight could not be maintained. At this point, the decision was made to jettison cargo in the interest of safety of the aircraft and crew. The first weapon was jettisoned at 4,500 feet altitude. The second weapon was jettisoned at approximately 2,500 feet altitude. No detonation occurred from either weapon. Both weapons are presumed to have been damaged from impact with the ocean surface. Both weapons are presumed to have submerged almost instantly. The ocean varies in depth in the area of the jettisonings. The C-124 landed at an airfield in the vicinity of Atlantic City, New Jersey, with the remaining weapon and the nuclear capsule aboard. A search for the weapons or debris had negative results.

* 1

October 11, 1957 / B-47 / Homestead AFB, Florida

The B-47 departed Homestead AFB shortly after midnight on a deployment mission. Shortly after liftoff one of aircraft's outrigger tires exploded. The aircraft crashed in an uninhabited area approximately 3,800 feet from the end of the runway. The aircraft was carrying one weapon in ferry configuration in the bomb bay and one nuclear capsule in a carrying case in the crew compartment. The weapon was enveloped in flames which burned and smoldered for approximately four hours after which time it was cooled with water. Two low order high explosive detonations occurred during the burning. The nuclear capsule and its carrying case were recovered intact and only slightly damaged by heat. Approximately one-half of the weapon remained. All major components were damaged but were identifiable and accounted for.

* 1

January 31, 1958 / B-47 / Overseas Base

A B-47 with one weapon in strike configuration was making a simulated takeoff during an exercise alert. When the aircraft reached approximately 30 knots on the runway, the left rear wheel casting failed. The tail struck the runway and a fuel tank ruptured. The aircraft caught fire and burned for seven hours. Firemen fought the fire for the allotted ten minutes fire fighting time for high explosive contents of that weapon, then evacuated the area. The high explosive did not detonate, but there was some contamination in the immediate area of the crash. After the wreckage and the asphalt beneath it were removed and the runway washed down, no contamination was detected. One fire truck and one fireman's clothing showed slight alpha contamination until washed. Following the accident, exercise alerts were temporarily suspended and B-47 wheels were checked for defects.

* 1

February 5, 1958 / B-47 / Savannah River, Georgia

The B-47 was on a simulated combat mission that originated at Homestead AFB, Florida. While near Savannah, Georgia, the B-47 had a mid-air collision at 3:30 a.m. with an F-86 aircraft. Following the collision the B-47 attempted three times to land at Hunter AFB, Georgia, with a weapon aboard. Because of the condition of the aircraft, its airspeed could not be reduced enough to insure a safe landing. Therefore, the decision was made to jettison the weapon rather than expose Hunter AFB to the possibility of a high explosive detonation. A nuclear detonation was not possible since the nuclear capsule was not aboard the aircraft. The weapon was jettisoned into the water several miles from the mouth of the Savannah River (Georgia) in Wassaw Sound off Tybee Beach. The precise weapon impact point is unknown. The weapon was dropped from an altitude of approximately 7,200 feet at an aircraft speed of 180-190 knots. No detonation occurred. After jettison the B-47 landed safely. A three square mile area was searched using a ship with divers and underwater demolition team technicians using Galvanic drag and hand-held sonar devices. The weapon was not found. The search was terminated April 16, 1958. The weapon was considered to be irretrievably lost.

* 1
** 2

March 11, 1958 / B-47 / Florence, South Carolina

On March 11, 1958 at 3:53 p.m. EST, a B-47E departed Hunter AFB, Georgia as number three aircraft in a flight of four enroute to an overseas base. After level off at 15,000 feet, the aircraft accidentally jettisoned an unarmed nuclear weapon which impacted in a sparsely populated area 6 1/2 miles east of Florence, South Carolina. The bomb's high explosive material exploded on impact. The detonation caused property damage and several injuries on the ground. The aircraft returned to base without further incident. No capsule of nuclear materials was aboard the B-47 or installed in the weapon.

* 1
** 2

November 4, 1958 / B-47 / Dyess AFB, Texas

A B-47 caught fire on take-off. Three crew members successfully ejected; one was killed when the aircraft crashed from an altitude of 1,500 feet. One nuclear weapon was on board when the aircraft crashed. The resultant detonation of the high explosive made a crater 35 feet in diameter and six feet deep. Nuclear materials were recovered near the crash site.

* 1
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November 26, 1958 / B-47 / Chennault AFB, Louisiana

A B-47 caught fire on the ground. The single nuclear weapon on board was destroyed by the fire. Contamination was limited to the immediate vicinity of the weapon residue within the aircraft wreckage.

* 1
** 2

January 18, 1959 / F-100 / Pacific Base

The aircraft was parked on a reveted hardstand in ground alert configuration. The external load consisted of a weapon on the left intermediate station and three fuel tanks (both inboard stations and the right intermediate station). When the starter button was depressed during a practice alert, an explosion and fire occurred when the external fuel tanks inadvertently jettisoned. Fire trucks at the scene put out the fire in about seven minutes. The capsule was not in the vicinity of the aircraft and was not involved in the accident. There were no contamination or cleanup problems.

* 1

July 6, 1959 / C-124 / Barksdale AFB, Louisiana

A C-124 on a nuclear logistics movement mission crashed on take-off. The aircraft was destroyed by fire which also destroyed one weapon. No nuclear or high explosive detonation occurred - safety devices functioned as designed. Limited contamination was present over a very small area immediately below the destroyed weapon. This contamination did not hamper rescue or fire fighting operations.

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CORRECTED COPY

January 7, 1982

September 25, 1959/P-5M/Pacific Ocean, off Washington-Oregon Coast

A U.S. Navy P-5M aircraft, assigned to NAS Whidbey Island, Washington, crashed in the Pacific Ocean about 100 miles west of the Washington-Oregon border. It was carrying an unarmed nuclear antisubmarine weapon containing no nuclear material. The weapon was not recovered.

CORRECTED COPY

October 15, 1959 / B-52 / KC-135 / Hardinsberg, Kentucky

The B-52 departed Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi at 2:30 p.m. CST, October 15, 1959. This aircraft assumed the #2 position in a flight of two. The KC-135 departed Columbus Air Force Base at 5:33 p.m. CST as the #2 tanker aircraft in a flight of two scheduled to refuel the B-52's. Rendezvous for refueling was accomplished in the vicinity of Hardinsberg, Kentucky at 32,000 feet. It was night, weather was clear, and there was no turbulence. Shortly after the B-52 began refueling from the KC-135, the two aircraft collided. The instructor pilot and pilot of the B-52 ejected, followed by the electronic warfare officer and the radar navigator. The co-pilot, navigator, instructor navigator, and tail gunner failed to leave the B-52. All four crewmembers in the KC-135 were fatally injured. The B-52's two unarmed nuclear weapons were recovered intact. One had been partially burned but this did not result in the dispersion of any nuclear material or other contamination.

* 1
** 2

June 7, 1960 / BOMARC / McGuire AFB, New Jersey

A BOMARC air defense missile in ready storage condition (permitting launch in two minutes) was destroyed by explosion and fire after a high pressure helium tank exploded and ruptured the missile's fuel tanks. The warhead was also destroyed by the fire although the high explosive did not detonate. Nuclear safety devices acted as designed. Contamination was restricted to an area immediately beneath the weapon and an adjacent elongated area approximately 100 feet long, caused by drain-off of firefighting water.

* 1
** 2

January 24, 1961 / B-52 / Goldsboro, North Carolina

During a B-52 airborne alert mission structural failure of the right wing resulted in two weapons separating from the aircraft during aircraft breakup at 2,000 - 10,000 feet altitude. One bomb parachute deployed and the weapon received little impact damage. The other bomb fell free and broke apart upon impact. No explosion occurred. Five of the eight crew members survived. A portion of one weapon, containing uranium, could not be recovered despite excavation in the waterlogged farmland to a depth of 50 feet. The Air Force subsequently purchased an easement requiring permission for anyone to dig there. There is no detectable radiation and no hazard in the area.

* 1
** 2

March 14, 1961 / B-52 / Yuba City, California

A B-52 experienced failure of the crew compartment pressurization system forcing descent to 10,000 feet altitude. Increased fuel consumption caused fuel exhaustion before rendezvous with a tanker aircraft. The crew bailed out at 10,000 feet except for the aircraft commander who stayed with the aircraft to 4,000 feet steering the plane away from a populated area. The two nuclear weapons on board were torn from the aircraft on ground impact. The high explosive did not detonate. Safety devices worked as designed and there was no nuclear contamination.

* 1
** 2

November 13, 1963 / Atomic Energy Commission Storage Igloo / Medina Base, Texas

An explosion involving 123,000 pounds of high explosive components of nuclear weapons caused minor injuries to three Atomic Energy Commission employees. There was little contamination from the nuclear components stored elsewhere in the building. The components were from obsolete weapons being disassembled.

January 13, 1964 / B-52 / Cumberland, Maryland

A B-52D was enroute from Westover Air Force Base, Massachusetts, to its home base at Turner Air Force Base, Georgia. The crash occurred approximately 17 miles SW of Cumberland, Maryland. The aircraft was carrying two weapons. Both weapons were in a tactical ferry configuration (no mechanical or electrical connections had been made to the aircraft and the safing switches were in the "SAFE" position). Prior to the crash, the pilot had requested a change of altitude because of severe air turbulence at 29,500 feet. The aircraft was cleared to climb to 33,000 feet. During the climb, the aircraft encountered violent air turbulence and aircraft structural failure subsequently occurred. Of the five aircrew members, only the pilot and co-pilot survived. The gunner and navigator ejected but died of exposure to sub-zero temperatures after successfully reaching the ground. The radar navigator did not eject and died upon aircraft impact. The crash site was an isolated mountainous and wooded area. The site had 14 inches of new snow covering the aircraft wreckage which was scattered over an area of approximately 100 yards square. The weather during the recovery and cleanup operation involved extreme cold and gusty winds. Both weapons remained in the aircraft until it crashed and were relatively intact in the approximate center of the wreckage area.

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** 2

December 5, 1964 / LGM 30B (Minuteman ICBM) / Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota

The LGM 30B Minuteman I missile was on strategic alert at Launch Facility (LF) L-02, Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota. Two airmen were dispatched to the LF to repair the inner zone (IZ) security system. In the midst of their checkout of the IZ system, one retrorocket in the spacer below the Reentry Vehicle (RV) fired, causing the RV to fall about 75 feet to the floor of the silo. When the RV struck the bottom of the silo, the arming and fusing/altitude control subsystem containing the batteries was torn loose, thus removing all sources of power from the RV. The RV structure received considerable damage. All safety devices operated properly in that they did not sense the proper sequence of events to allow arming the warhead. There was no detonation or radioactive contamination.

* 1

December 8, 1964 / B-58 / Bunker Hill (Now Grissom) AFB, Indiana

SAC aircraft were taxiing during an exercise alert. As one B-58 reached a position directly behind the aircraft on the runway ahead of it, the aircraft ahead brought advanced power. As a result of the combination of the jet blast from the aircraft ahead, the icy runway surface conditions, and the power applied to the aircraft while attempting to turn onto the runway, control was lost and the aircraft slid off the left hand side of the taxiway. The left main landing gear passed over a flush mounted taxiway light fixture and 10 feet further along in its travel, grazed the left edge of a concrete light base. Ten feet further, the left main landing gear struck a concrete electrical manhole box, and the aircraft caught on fire. When the aircraft came to rest, all three crew members aboard began abandoning the aircraft. The aircraft commander and defensive systems operator egressed with only minor injuries. The navigator ejected in his escape capsule, which impacted 548 feet from the aircraft. He did not survive. Portions of the five nuclear weapons on-board burned; contamination was limited to the immediate area of the crash and was subsequently removed.

* 1

October 11, 1965 / C-124 / Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio

The aircraft was being refueled in preparation for a routine logistics mission when a fire occurred at the aft end of the refueling trailer. The fuselage of the aircraft, containing only components of nuclear weapons and a dummy training unit, was destroyed by the fire. There were no casualties. The resultant radiation hazard was minimal. Minor contamination was found on the aircraft, cargo and clothing of explosive ordnance disposal and fire fighting personnel, and was removed by normal cleaning.

* 1

December 5, 1965 / A-4 / At Sea, Pacific

An A-4 aircraft loaded with one nuclear weapon rolled off the elevator of a U.S. aircraft carrier and fell into the sea. The pilot, aircraft, and weapon were lost. The incident occurred more than 500 miles from land.

January 17, 1966 / B-52 / KC-135 / Palomares, Spain

The B-52 and the KC-135 collided during a routine high altitude air refueling operation. Both aircraft crashed near Palomares, Spain. Four of the eleven crewmembers survived. The B-52 carried four nuclear weapons. One was recovered on the ground, and one was recovered from the sea, on April 7, after extensive search and recovery efforts. Two of the weapons' high explosive materials exploded on impact with the ground, releasing some radioactive materials. Approximately 1400 tons of slightly contaminated soil and vegetation were removed to the United States for storage at an approved site. Representatives of the Spanish government monitored the cleanup operation.

* 1
** 2

January 21, 1968 / B-52 / Thule, Greenland

A B-52 from Plattsburgh AFB, New York, crashed and burned some seven miles southwest of the runway at Thule AB, Greenland while approaching the base to land. Six of the seven crewmembers survived. The bomber carried four nuclear weapons, all of which were destroyed by fire. Some radioactive contamination occurred in the area of the crash, which was on the sea ice. Some 237,000 cubic feet of contaminated ice, snow and water, with crash debris, were removed to an approved storage site in the United States over the course of a four-month operation. Although an unknown amount of contamination was dispersed by the crash, environmental sampling showed normal readings in the area after the cleanup was completed. Representatives of the Danish government monitored the cleanup operations.

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** 2

Spring 1968 / At Sea, Atlantic

Details remain classified.

September 19, 1980 / Titan II ICBM / Damascus, Arkansas

During routine maintenance in a Titan II silo, an Air Force repairman dropped a heavy wrench socket, which rolled off a work platform and fell toward the bottom of the silo. The socket bounced and struck the missile, causing a leak from a pressurized fuel tank. The missile complex and the surrounding area were evacuated and a team of specialists was called in from Little Rock Air Force Base, the missile's main support base. About 8 1/2 hours after the initial puncture, fuel vapors within the silo ignited and exploded. The explosion fatally injured one member of the team. Twenty-one other USAF personnel were injured. The missile's re-entry vehicle, which contained a nuclear warhead, was recovered intact. There was no radioactive contamination.

* 1

Questions from Neil Sheehan, N. Y. Times, on the Thule
H-Bomb Cleanup

Question 1: What did the ice borings show in terms of radioactivity in the ice, how deep did the radioactivity go into immediate impact area of the plane and over how wide an area did the radioactivity spread?

Answer: See joint statement released by Danish/American scientists on March 19, 1968. We have nothing further to add at this time to this joint communique.

Question 2: How high in counts per minute was the radioactivity in the ice?

Answer: Same as answer number 1.

Question 3: Did the ice in the impact area melt or was it broken all the way through and did parts of the bombs or the plane go through into the sea?

Answer 3: There was some melting and fracturing of the ice in the impact area which permitted debris to go through into the sea. The Star III oceanographic research submersible, in surveying the area below the crash site, has confirmed the fact that fragments of the aircraft came to rest on the sea bottom. They are fixed and harmless.

Question 4: What did the snow samplings show and over how wide an area were they taken?

Answer: Same as answer to Number 1.

Question 5: How far from the crash scene did the radioactivity spread? Please state levels of radioactivity in counts per minute. For example, what were the counts per minute of snow within 300 yards of the swath where the plane hit and what were the readings of snow samples taken from one and two and three miles away?

Answer 5: Same as Answer Number 1.

Question 6: What were the ultimate dimensions of the cleanup problem. How many men were involved, how long did it take, how much money did it cost. Is the cleanup all finished or is there more to do? If there is more what remains and how will it be accomplished?

Answer 6: During the peak of activity approximately 560 men were involved in cleanup operations. The remaining task involved removal of all contaminated debris, snow and ice to the United States for final disposition in accordance with the agreement reached in mid-March by the Danish and U.S. authorities. No total cost figure will be available for some time to come.

Question 7: How much ice was removed?

Answer: The snow and ice removed filled 67 25,000-gallon fuel tanks. The melted volume of this material is about 550,000 gallons.

Question 8: How much snow was removed?

Answer: Same as answer to question number 7.

Question 9: Please describe how the removal of ice and snow was accomplished and what was done or will be done with the contaminated ice and snow?

Answer 9: The contaminated snow was windrowed by road grader, picked up by belt loader, conveyed into plywood boxes, hauled to the main base and dumped into 25,000-gallon fuel tanks. The contaminated ice beneath the snow was scarified by road grader, then harvested in the same manner as the snow. The tanks containing snow and

ice were sealed to prevent any spread of contamination. The contents were later melted with the aid of hot air, then pumped into modified aircraft engine containers. The filled engine containers and empty fuel tanks will be returned to the United States by ocean vessel, starting late summer.

Question 10A. To what level of radioactivity, counts per minute, was ice and snow removed? In other words, was a minimum level of radioactivity established and all ice and snow above this level removed. If a minimum was established, what was it? Please state in counts per minute.

Answer: Same as answer to Question Number 1.

Question 10B: Was any compensation paid to the Danish Government or to the eskimos in the area. Did the crash and the aftermath of radioactive contamination and the cleanup job have any effect on hunting by the Eskimos or hinder their hunting in any way?

Answer: Early in the cleanup operation some Eskimos' outer clothing, made of animal furs, was lightly contaminated with Alpha particles. Because this clothing could not be decontaminated completely its owners were compensated with their choice of similar fur garments or Air Force cold weather clothing. The majority chose the Air Force clothing. Eskimos were prohibited by the Greenland authorities from trespassing in the area of cleanup. This temporary restriction slightly altered their hunting habits but produced no hardships among them.

Question 11: What portion of the bombs were found and how much of the weapons was lost in the explosion or into the sea. What I would like to know is how much of the original weapons were we able to reconstruct from the fragments found?

Answer 11: As you know, the Air Force announced that significant portions of all four weapons had been recovered. Because we are discussing nuclear weapons you will understand that we cannot elaborate for reasons of classification.

Question 12: What kind of cleanup program did the Danish Government request? What minimum level of radioactivity in counts per minute did they agree to accept and how much snow and ice did they want removed?

Answer 12: The Danish Government readily agreed to the cleanup program proposed by the United States. No minimum level of radioactivity was stipulated. Danish authorities have repeatedly expressed full satisfaction with U.S. cleanup measures.

Question 13: Did the fish and mammal samples (walruses, seals, etc.) show any traces of radioactivity? If so, what were the levels in counts per minute or in amounts of plutonium found in the intestines? Do plankton taken from the sea in the area show any trace of radioactivity?

Answer 13: As stated in the joint communique our measurements have confirmed the earlier view that there is no risk for human beings nor for marine, animal or plant life. We have nothing further to add to this statement although further studies are continuing as part of the summer ecological survey.

Question 14: Was the Navy called upon to participate in any way? If so, how? Did they do any underwater recovery work, for example? I have heard that the Navy conducted a study of the ice in the area to determine the amount of radioactivity and bomb fragments that remained in the ice after the cleanup had been completed. If there was such a study by the Navy, what were its dimensions and what were its results?

Answer: The Navy provided infrared photomapping of the impact area and oceanographic consultant services to the Air Force. The other information you have heard is incorrect. The Navy is participating in the summer ecological survey as described in our press release of August 9, 1968. (748-68)

Question 15: Was any radioactivity left in the ice? If so, what will happen to this radioactivity now that the ice is melting. What level of radioactivity was left in the ice or in the snow on top of it. Again please state in counts per minute.

Answer 15: Little radioactivity was left in the ice. As has been stated previously, if all the plutonium in the four weapons were dissolved in one cubic kilometer of water, the water would still be drinkable. Actually plutonium oxide is quite insoluble, hence whatever remained would settle to the ocean floor and be harmless.

Question 16: Has the ice in the impact area and for three miles around it melted yet and drifted out to sea? If so, how much has melted and how much has broken off and drifted out to sea?

Answer 16: The impact area ice has all melted. The surrounding ice has also broken up. No significant drifting has occurred.

Question 17: Is any effort being made to track the radioactive ice from the bay that has drifted out to sea and to trace where the radioactivity is being carried by the ocean currents as the ice melts?

Answer 17: The question supposes that there is significant radioactivity in the outlying ice areas and that these areas are substantial drifting ice floes. This is not the case. No special effort is being made to track any drifting ice.

Question 18: Have there been any changes in Strategic Air Command operations as far as planes carrying nuclear weapons in the Greenland area or in the safety precautions and emergency procedures observed by B-52 bombers carrying nuclear weapons anywhere?

Answer 18: In line with the U.S. Government's policy neither to confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear weapons as they relate to our operational posture, we are unable to comment on this question. With respect to precautions and safety procedures, no changes were made. The effectiveness of the procedures and safety features designed and employed in the weapon system provided complete satisfaction in the accident environment.

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OJCS INFORMATION SERVICE CENTER

PRIORITY ZYUW RUEKJCS0558 3552134
 P 212134Z DEC 87
 FM SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//ASD:PA/DDI//
 TO USDAO COPENHAGEN DA SECSTATE WASHINGTON DC
 OSAF WASHINGTON DC//PAM/GCI/IGF//
 DIA WASHINGTON DC//DAH-7//
 HQUSAF WASHINGTON DC//XOO/XOX/CAVLI//
 HQSAC OFFUTT AFB NE//PA// HQSAFE RAMSTEIN AB GE//XP/PA//
 USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN GE//ECAP// USIA WASHINGTON DC
 HQAFSPACECOM PETERSON AFB CO//CC/POLAD/XPXB//
 JCS WASHINGTON DC//J5//

PLATTSBURGH AFB, NEW YORK, CRASHED AND BURNED SOME SEVEN MILES WEST OF THE RUNWAY AT THULE AB, GREENLAND, WHILE APPROACHING THULE TO LAND. SIX OF THE SEVEN CREWMEMBERS SURVIVED. THE BOMBER CARRIED FOUR NUCLEAR WEAPONS, ALL OF WHICH WERE DESTROYED BY FIRE. SOME RADIOACTIVE CONTAMINATION OCCURRED IN THE AREA OF THE CRASH, WHICH WAS ON THE SEA ICE. SOME 237,000 CUBIC FEET OF CONTAMINATED ICE SNOW & WATER, WITH CRASH DEBRIS, WERE REMOVED TO A APPROVED STORAGE SITE IN THE UNITED STATES OVER THE COURSE OF FOUR-MONTH OPERATIONS. ALTHOUGH AN UNKNOWN AMOUNT OF CONTAMINATION WAS DISPERSED BY THE CRASH, ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLING SHOWED NORMAL READINGS IN THE AREA AFTER THE CLEANUP WAS COMPLETED. REPRESENTATIVES OF THE DANISH GOVERNMENT MONITORED THE CLEANUP OPERATIONS. END QUOTE. DOD COMMENT BY THAT STATEMENT TODAY.

UNCLAS

SUBJ: ADDITIONAL REQUEST FOR INFO RELATED TO B-52 CRASH
 REF: USDAO COPENHAGEN MSG, DTG 161618Z DEC 87, SAME SUBJ
 1. REF MSG REQUESTED OASD/PA ADVISE IF FILM, VIDEO OR REPORTS ON THE 1968 B-52 CRASH NEAR THULE, GREENLAND, ARE EXTANT. IN ADDITION TO DOD SEARCHING ALL AVAILABLE FILES, THE AIR FORCE, DOE, AND DMA ARE ALSO CHECKING THEIR RECORDS FOR ANY FILM/VIDEO OF SUBMERSIBLE OPS. WE HAVEN'T TURNED UP ANYTHING YET. WILL KEEP LOOKING.
 2. IN ANY EVENT, THIS IS A RED HERRING. THERE IS NOT NOW, NOR WAS THERE EVER, AN INTACT BOMB ON THE SEA BED OR ELSEWHERE AT THE CRASH SITE. IN A DOD ANNOUNCEMENT DATED 28 JAN 88, WE STATED PUBLICLY QUOTE PARTS OF ALL FOUR NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN THE CRASHED B-52 NEAR THULE, GREENLAND, HAVE BEEN FOUND. U. S. AIR FORCE INVESTIGATORS ON THE SCENE SAID TODAY THAT SERIAL NUMBERS ON WEAPON FRAGMENTS FOUND ON THE ICE AT THE SITE OF THE CRASH CORRESPOND WITH STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND RECORDS OF NUMBERS ON VARIOUS COMPONENTS OF THE FOUR WEAPONS. END QUOTE. IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS WE ALSO ADDED QUOTE IT MEANS ALL FOUR WEAPONS DID BREAK UP AND THAT AT LEAST PARTS OF ALL FOUR ARE ON THE SURFACE OR FROZEN INTO THE ICE END QUOTE AND QUOTE IT MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR ONE OR MORE BOMBS TO HAVE GONE THROUGH THE ICE AND INTO THE BAY END QUOTE.
 3. THE CLEAN-UP ACTIVITY, IN WHICH THE DANISH GOVERNMENT ADVISED AND MONITORED, WAS WIDELY AND PUBLICLY REPORTED ON BY THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS/PHOTOGRAPHY CORPS AT THE SCENE FOR MONTHS. THE PUBLIC RECORD SHOWS MANY INSTANCES WHERE DOD RECONFIRMED THAT QUOTE SIGNIFICANT PORTIONS OF ALL FOUR WEAPONS WERE RECOVERED END QUOTE. DOD NEVER RULED OUT THE POSSIBILITY THAT SOME DEBRIS, PERHAPS INCLUDING WEAPON DEBRIS, MAY HAVE GONE THROUGH THE THREE- TO FOUR-FOOT THICK ICE, BUT THERE WAS NEVER A DOUBT THAT THE WEAPONS THEMSELVES HAD BEEN DESTROYED IN THE CRASH. FOLLOWING THE AUGUST 88 EXPLORATION OF THE SEA BED BY THE OCEANOGRAPHIC RESEARCH SUBMERSIBLE STAR III, DOD STATED QUOTE IN SURVEYING THE AREA BELOW THE CRASH SITE, (STAR III) CONFIRMED THE FACT THAT SMALL FRAGMENTS OF THE AIRCRAFT CAME TO REST ON THE SEA BOTTOM. THEY ARE FIXED AND HARMLESS. END QUOTE. ALLEGATIONS THAT FILM FROM THE SUBMERSIBLE VEHICLE REVEALED A BOMB ARE UNTRUE: OBSERVER MUST HAVE MISINTERPRETED IMAGES OF AIRCRAFT DEBRIS, AS NO BOMB EXISTS.
 4. JOINT DANISH-U.S. SCIENTIFIC STATEMENTS ALSO EXPRESSED SATISFACTION WITH THE CLEAN-UP EFFORT. ON 16 FEB 88, FOR EXAMPLE, A JOINT STATEMENT SIGNED BY DR. CARL WALSKE, U.S. ASSISTANT TO THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE (ATOMIC ENERGY), AND H.H. KOCH, CHAIRMAN OF THE DANISH ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION, CONCLUDED THAT THE RADIOACTIVITY AT THE SITE POSED NO CURRENT OR FUTURE DANGERS. EIGHTEEN OTHER PREEMINENT DANISH GOVERNMENT, SCIENTIFIC AND ACADEMIC PROFESSIONALS ENGAGED IN THAT STUDY. ANOTHER JOINT STATEMENT ON 19 MAR 88 QUOTE CONFIRMED THE EARLIER VIEWS THAT THERE IS NO RISK FOR HUMAN BEINGS, NOR FOR MARINE, ANIMAL, OR PLANT LIFE. END QUOTE. ON SEPT 9, 1988, DOD ANNOUNCED THAT THE THULE CRASH SITE HAD BEEN CLEARED TO THE SATISFACTION OF BOTH U.S. AND DANISH OFFICIALS AND THAT THE INCIDENT WAS CLOSED. WE ALSO UNDERSTAND THE DANES SUBSEQUENTLY UNDERTOOK AT LEAST ONE FOLLOW-UP SCIENTIFIC STUDY (IN AUGUST 1970) AND POSSIBLY OTHERS.
 5. ON THE USG SIDE, THIS ISSUE WAS LAST FORMALLY VISITED IN MAY 1981 WHEN DOD RELEASED A COMPREHENSIVE AND THOROUGHLY COORDINATED SUMMARY OF ALL NUCLEAR WEAPONS ACCIDENTS WHICH HAD OCCURRED UP TO THAT TIME. IN THAT SUMMARY, WE STATED THAT ON JAN 21, 1968 QUOTE A B-52 FROM

8. IN RESPONSE TO QUERIES STEMMING FROM DENMARK'S RADIO'S 12-1: DEC STORIES, OASD/PA SPOKESMEN HAVE RESPONDED IN THE CONTEXT OF ABOVE LONG-STANDING PUBLIC STATEMENTS. THE SHORT ANSWER TO THE QUESTION: IS THERE AN UNRECOVERED NUCLEAR BOMB IN THE ARCTIC OFF THE COAST OF THULE? IS QUOTE NO END QUOTE. OASD/PA POC I RANDAL MORGER, (202) 697-5131. 87

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ACTION JS(B) ASD:PA(1) DAH-7(2) (D.U.6.7.F)
 INFO CJCS(5) DJS:(1) NIDS(1) QUAL CONTROL(1) SECDEF:(1)
 SECDEF(9) CAO(1) NMIC(1) DIO-EUR(1) DE-3(1) DB-3B(2)
 DIA(1) DC-4A2(1)
 +SAFE

MCN=87355/05910 TOR=87355/2133Z TAD=87355/2137Z

CDSN=MAK989
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Passed to Press - 1430 - 28 Jan by
Duty Officer

FOR THE PRESS

January 28, 1968

No. 96-68

OXford 7-5131 (Info.)

OXford 7-3189 (Copies)

Parts of all four nuclear weapons in the crashed B-52 near Thule, Greenland, have been found. U. S. Air Force investigators on the scene said today that serial numbers on weapon fragments found on the ice at the site of the crash correspond with Strategic Air Command records of numbers on various components of the four weapons. The search is continuing for the remaining weapon fragments.

after 1430



and to Chicago. This Press Release - on CHINS - 1500 by SAC

McCue (State)

182-2428

AU 8-631-3600 (4130)