

Armed B-52 Overflight: Accident or Interrupted Raid?

By Paul Vos Benkowski and John LaForge

On Aug. 30, six nuclear warheads were removed from high security storage and installed in six Advanced Cruise Missiles at the Minot Air Force Base (AFB) in North Dakota. Then the missiles, designed to be fired from B-52 bombers, were attached to the wings of just such a B-52.

The B-52 then flew to Barksdale AFB in Louisiana without proper clearance and in violation of strict, decades-old Air Force prohibitions against transport of nuclear weapons by air. The no-fly rule was enacted after nuclear warheads were damaged or lost during bomber crashes in Greenland, Spain and South Carolina in the 1950s and '60s.

Air Force officials admitted that, "The warheads were unaccounted for several hours while the missiles were in transit," the *Washington Post* reported. Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Newton told the BBC that the aircraft's pilots and other crew members were unaware that they were carrying

nuclear warheads. After their three-and-one-half hour flight, the weapons sat on a runway at Barksdale AFB for nearly ten hours before workers noticed that the nuclear warheads were inside the missiles.

Hans Kristensen, a weapons expert at the Federation of American Scientists, reports that the spectacularly unusual flight was the first time in 40 years that a nuclear-armed warplane was allowed to fly across the U.S. In 1991, President George H. Bush ordered nuclear weapons removed from all aircraft and surface ships.

The Air Force sought at first to bury the incident, and issued a dismissive notice declaring, "No press interest anticipated." But a few conscientious officers leaked the story to *The Military Times* which caused a worldwide sensation and forced the Air Force to conduct an investigation.

The Air Force now says the missiles were being delivered to Barksdale for decommissioning. Yet retired Cruise missiles are normally sent to Kirtland AFB, in New Mexico, which ships them to the Pantex dismantlement site in Texas. Barksdale AFB, on the other hand, trains all the B-52 combat crews and is the main staging area for B-52s heading into combat in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On Oct. 20, Gen. Newton said the unauthorized fly-over involved an "unprecedented string of procedural errors." Consequently, three colonels and a Lt. Col., including a Wing Commander and the Base Commander at Minot, were sacked and 66 airmen were decertified for nuclear weapons handling.

However, calling such an extraordinarily complex and procedure-laden flight an "error" stretches credulity to the breaking point. Kristensen says, "It seems so fantastic that so many points, checks can dysfunction." Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., told the *Post*, "Nothing like this has ever been reported before, and we have been assured for decades that it was impossible."

Investigative reporter Dave Lindorff has found, "There is something deeply disturbing about the official report," which claims that, "six nuclear warheads get mounted on six Advanced Cruise Missiles and improperly removed from a nuclear weapons storage bunker at Minot ... then get improperly loaded on a B-52, and then get improperly flown to Barksdale AFB."

The problem with the official explanation, Lindorff writes, is that "all nuclear warheads in the U.S. stockpile are supposedly protected against accidental transport or removal from bunkers by electronic anti-theft systems ... and even anti-motion sensors that go off if a weapon is touched or approached without authorization." Under strict Air Force rules at least two people had to have deliberately disabled those alarms.

The Air Force cover story begs more questions than it answers. Who ordered the disabling of alarms and sensors, and the arming and loading of missiles? Why did the bomber fly to Barksdale? Were the missiles flyable, fueled up and ready to fire? Finally, did the *Military Times* news scoop foil a surprise attack, say on Iran, as researcher Michael E. Salla has asked? Congress should be pressed to investigate.

Continued from the Cover

Train Derailments

into a switching mechanism. The vandalism was discovered before causing a derailment.

One guard who contacted a local anti-nuclear organization to complain, since contact with the NRC's inspector general's office brought no corrective action, reported to North Carolina's *Independent Weekly* that "People are so frightened [of reprisals]..." he said. "They get fired right and left."

In 1999, Richard Kester, a former high-ranking security official at Shearon Harris, was fired after refusing to lie to the NRC about improper security clearances.

In 2002, two prison escapees climbed aboard one of Progress Energy's waste fuel transport train cars, exposing the vulnerability of its rail shipments.

In 2005, the 9/11 Commission gave the Department of Homeland Security a "D" for failing to guarantee safety and security at the country's 103 commercial power reactors.

European waste shipments no safer

On Feb. 4, 1997, a train carrying four Castor casks loaded with approximately 360,000 pounds of irradiated fuel rods derailed while switching in Apach, France. Three of the casks derailed completely but didn't tip over. The train was traveling about 20 miles per hour and the casks have been crash tested at 30 mph. Greenpeace reports that trains carrying deadly radioactive cargo in Europe often travel up to 60 mph. The fuel rod shipment began at the Lingen reactor in Germany, and headed for Sellafield on Britain's west coast where it was to be transferred to the freighter *European Shearwater*. A few hours behind this transport and on the same railway stretch was the transport with waste fuel from the Krümmel reactor — a shipment Greenpeace activists had blockaded for a week near Hamburg. This second train was detained in Trier until it could be re-routed. On Jan. 15, 1997, a train derailed outside the German reactor at Krümmel during a track change. On Feb. 3 of the same year, an engine driver carrying nuclear waste passed out on the job. In 1998, Castor casks were stopped during a shipment because exterior radiation levels exceeded the legal limit.

U.S. Military Cask Accident Noted Only in Foreign Press

An Associated Press report dated Sept. 22, 2005, and printed in the London *Guardian*, dispels the myth of "no danger to the public" when shipping high-level waste.

The AP photo (on cover) shows a Department of Energy "M-140" cask lying on its side in the CSX Frontier Rail Yard in Buffalo, New York. The M-140 is the Navy's standard canister for shipping waste fuel from shipboard reactors to a dump in Idaho. (Nukewatch published extensive news and picture postcards of these shipments in the 1990s.)

The AP reported that the 320,000-pound M-140 container — which luckily was unloaded — tipped over when two trains merged at one switch. Part of the rail yard was shut down. It took workers from the Bettis Atomic Power Lab, Knolls Atomic Power Lab and the Portsmouth Naval shipyard 36 hours to right the cask and 60 hours to repair it. State and Federal officials were called to investigate. A Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program report of Oct. 2006 says, "Dealing with a full canister would probably result in a similar scenario on the public affairs side."

In view of the fact that not a single newspaper in the United States reported this accident, the "public affairs side" seems to have been flawless. From the military, government and industry points of view, it didn't happen.

Extensive shielding on casks keeps radiation levels on the outside low, but the deadly nature of the contents guarantees that anyone investigating a breached cask could die within minutes of approaching the waste. All military and civilian waste reactor fuel shipments are done in secret and without consent from uninformed *en route* communities.



February 4, 1997 — A Castor cask carrying deadly used reactor fuel rods, derailed in Apach, France.

Israel Bombs Suspected Syrian Reactor Building Site

By John LaForge

Israeli jets are reported to have bombed Syria Sept. 6, evidently targeting a partly-built nuclear reactor, which appears from satellite photos to be modeled on one North Korea has used to produce nuclear weapons material, according to U.S. and other officials.

The attack on the Syrian reactor construction site mirrored Israel's bombing raid against Iraq in 1981, which destroyed the newly-completed Osirak nuclear reactor.

The September bombardment, according to U.S. and international authorities, targeted a Syrian project that was still "years" away from operation and any production of highly radioactive waste fuel from which plutonium can be extracted for H-bombs.

In the U.S. and Israel, "information about the raid has been wrapped in extraordinary secrecy and restricted to just a handful of officials," according to the *New York Times*, which reported that the Israeli press has been prohibited from publishing anything about the September bombing.

Pentagon chief Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reportedly voiced concerns, "about the ramifications of a pre-emptive strike in the absence of an urgent threat" — something they know a lot about. (George Bush expanded on the hypocrisy theme Nov. 9 when he said to Pakistani dictator Gen. Pervez Musharraf, "You can't be president and head of the military at the same time.")

The *Times* mentioned — in a manner rare when reporting on Iran's nuclear power program — that as a party to the

Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, Syria is not obligated to declare the existence of a reactor under construction. "It would have also had the legal right to complete construction of the reactor, as long as its purpose was to generate electricity."

Kevin Drum, in the *Washington Monthly*, reported that the International Atomic Energy Agency's director and Nobel Peace laureate Mohamed ElBaradei expressed anger at the Syrians, Israelis and [U.S.] foreign intelligence agencies for not providing information about a suspected nuclear program. "We have said, 'If any of you has the slightest information showing that there was anything linked to nuclear, we would of course be happy to investigate it,'" he told the French newspaper *Le Monde*. In a thinly veiled criticism of Israel and the U.S., ElBaradei added, "Frankly, I venture to hope that before people decide to bombard and use force, they will come and see us to convey their concerns."

Violations of Geneva Conventions

Israel's 1981 and 2007 bombings of nuclear reactor sites are both violations of the Geneva Conventions relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts.

Article 52, Sec. 1 of Protocol I of June 8, 1977, says "Civilian objects shall not be the object of attack or of reprisals." Art. 56 notes, "Works or installations containing dangerous forces, namely dams, dykes and nuclear electrical generating stations, shall not be made the object of attack, even where these objects are military objectives, if such attack may cause the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population."

Bush Threatens World War III Over "Knowledge"



With the sophistication of a comic book he-man, George Bush uttered a staggering yet preposterous threat Oct. 17 from the White House. Bush said, "I've told people that if you're interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing [Iranians] from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear [sic] weapon." The knowledge of nuclear weapons design has been public information for over 30 years, even if its pronunciation still eludes the President. Anyone with access to what Bush calls "the internets" can learn how. In 1979 the details were drawn from open sources by Howard Morland for *The Progressive* magazine article that the government attempted to censor and that in turn became the impetus for launching Nukewatch. News anchors speculated that Bush's shocking reference to world war was intended to distract public attention from the bloody quagmire created in Iraq by the U.S. military takeover and occupation, a war that both Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General, and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia have called "illegal."

Would You Buy A Used Car From the Vice President?

"We have great information. They're going to welcome us. It'll be like the American Army going through the streets of Paris. They're sitting there ready to form a new government. The people will be so happy with their freedoms that we'll probably back ourselves out of there within a month or two."

— Vice President Dick Cheney in September 2002, trying to persuade Dick Arme, the Republican House majority leader, that U.S. war on Iraq would be quick.

DOONESBURY GARRY TRUDEAU

