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The Lede

Blogging the News With Robert Mackey



September 5, 2007, 1:41 pm

Loose Nukes: Warheads in the Sky

By [MIKE NIZZA](#)



A file photo of a B-52

bomber. (Photo: David Castro/Guahan Magazine)

The Military Times [brings word](#) of a screw-up in the United States Air Force that has already cost a squadron leader his command and sent shocked headlines around the Web.

On Aug. 30, a B-52 bomber took off from Minot Air Force base in North Dakota with ~~between five and six~~ nuclear warheads, the report says. They were supposed to be detached from cruise missiles before the flight.

The good news: the plane did not embark on some rogue mission straight out of TV's "24," instead landing safely and without the intervention of Jack Bauer at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana.

The bad news: the weapons were missing from Minot during the three-hour flight, and no alarms sounded. At first glance, that's extremely scary — [loose nukes!](#) — but there was "never a danger to the American public," according to one official quoted by the Military Times. Even if the bomber crashed, there would be [no nuclear detonation](#):

A crash could ignite the high explosives associated with the warhead, and possibly cause a leak of the plutonium, but the warheads' elaborate safeguards would prevent a nuclear detonation from occurring, [Steve Fetter, a former Defense Department official who worked on nuclear weapons policy in 1993-94,] said.

"The main risk would have been the way the Air Force responded to any problems with the flight because they would have handled it much differently if they would have known nuclear warheads were onboard," he said.

The military immediately sent alerts up the chain of command, including President Bush and Gen. Peter Pace , the chairman of the joint chiefs, Agence France Presse [said](#).

And the Air Force launched an immediate investigation "to find the cause of the mistake and figure out how it could have been prevented," the Military Times said. It evidently faulted the squadron commander, as a fairly damning quote — "the Air Force has lost all confidence in his ability to handle nuclear weapons" — suggests in an [NBC News](#) report.

Friday, 9:03 a.m. Eastern [Arms Control Wonk](#) notices a news release from Minot Air Force Base with a headline that is extremely funny in hindsight: "[Enjoy a safe Labor Day weekend.](#)"

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1. 1. September 5, 2007 2:00 pm [Link](#)

More evidence that the kids at the Pentagon shouldn't be allowed to play with these toys. Probably humanity's fate won't be decided by evil, greed, or wrath, but by stupidity.

Funny that there's a standard, often-used codename for loose nukes, 'broken arrow'... this happens quite a bit. Good thing we have so many warheads, right?

— *Dan Stackhouse*

2. 2. September 5, 2007 2:08 pm [Link](#)

Military is overstretched by all its commitments. Do we need any more evidence of what can go wrong when our defense priorities are all wrong.

— *Mark*

3. 3. September 5, 2007 2:09 pm [Link](#)

nukes have been flying over US ever since they were invented. How do you think they get to where they are going?

— *mike*

4. 4. September 5, 2007 2:11 pm [Link](#)

How can you possibly have “between five and six” nuclear warheads? C’mon now!

— *RMH*

5. 5. September 5, 2007 2:13 pm [Link](#)

“Broken Arrow” is the often-used codename for loose nukes...in the movie Broken Arrow. In real life, the military use a less alarming codename: Dust Bunnies.

— *Stack Danhouse*

6. 6. September 5, 2007 2:15 pm [Link](#)

Another perfect example of the inmates running the asylum. The same bunch given the responsibility for defending us from a nuclear threat instead create one. Once again “Military Intelligence” is shown to be the oxymoron it truly is. But then the tone starts at the top and we all know the commander in chief is not much of a deep thinker or a details kind of guy. He’s just the decider, maybe he and his minions should work a little harder at becoming thinkers.

— *byron*

7. 7. September 5, 2007 2:27 pm [Link](#)

With the “best of the best” in technology it blows me away that the military still makes these kinds of mistakes. I love the communication & organization our military demonstrates, no wonder our deficit continues to grow at a rapid pace...

— *Bryce Mirtle*

8. 8. September 5, 2007 2:28 pm [Link](#)

everyone’s annoyance at this is ridiculous. during the cold war and the days of SAC there were ALWAYS nuclear weapons overhead. There probably still are! This just got reported because someone lost his job over it.

— *bob*

9. 9. September 5, 2007 2:29 pm [Link](#)

Funny, that was my line in a movie by the same name.

— *John Travolta*

10. 10. September 5, 2007 2:29 pm [Link](#)

well, noooo human ingenuity and safeguarding actually prevented human stupidity from sealing our “fate”; fatalistic destruction which never would have happened with a merely a handful of nukes anyway.

— *krob*

11. 11. September 5, 2007 2:31 pm [Link](#)

Sounds like a job for Christian Slater....

“We call it...’a broken arrow’!”

— *Frank*

12. 12. September 5, 2007 2:32 pm [Link](#)

Scary that the nuclear weapons were “missing” for three hours. Though the warheads never left the control of the USAF it’s further proof that our military is stretched too thin. With so many deployed it’s not difficult to see that domestic military operations are beginning to suffer.

All military operations are important but those involving nuclear munitions fall under very strict guidelines. I'm surprised that this could happen. Let's pay attention here folks.

— *Ben Stendahl*

13. 13. September 5, 2007 2:35 pm [Link](#)

“never a danger to the American public,”

Excuse me? Seems if we have a situation where the crowd pleasers are this easy to take for a spin, there is a *constant* danger to the American (sic) public – there's not positive control over these maintained at all times.

— *paul burrell*

14. 14. September 5, 2007 2:37 pm [Link](#)

“between five and six nuclear warheads”

I'm glad you left your options open by being vague. If it turns out that 5 and one half warheads were on board, you'll be glad you covered your bases.

Perhaps its more disturbing that we can't get a concise number... one would hope a missing warhead would cause enough of a stir to warrant announcing the proper quantity.

— *Gary*

15. 15. September 5, 2007 2:37 pm [Link](#)

Small correction: “Broken Arrow” is the code for a Nuclear Accident...this is what would be termed a “Dull Sword”: a Nuclear Incident. The AC (Aircraft Commander) and the Ammo troops heads WILL roll, probably along with Wing Commander's too.

— *Don*

16. 16. September 5, 2007 2:38 pm [Link](#)

To Dan Stackhouse:

Broken Arrow is not the code for missing nuclear weapons. John Travolta movies are not documentaries.

— *Big Frankie C*

17. 17. September 5, 2007 2:40 pm [Link](#)

This is only important because the world is now full of nuclear powers — everybody from Britain, France, India, Pakistan, China and Russia, to Israel (!) and Japan (!) — and mutual sanity requires mutual second-by-second reckoning of where those nukes are. The scary bit is, somebody lost track of the accounting, not that there were nukes overhead for a few hours.

— *grikdog*

18. 18. September 5, 2007 2:41 pm [Link](#)

It is not indicated as to which “Squadron Commander” lost his job, but it should probably include more than one. There is a Squadron Commander for the B-52's, and usually there is a different Squadron Commander for the Munitions area that stores, maintains, and tracks all of the munitions. I would also suggest the Wing Commander should most likely go with them, as he/she is not running a tight organization. The real problem is at the Wing Commander level. The others are a reflection of his/her lack of leadership.

— *Denis O'Connor*

19. 19. September 5, 2007 2:42 pm [Link](#)

Squadron Commander huh? That has a nice ring to it. Maybe they will post that job on Craigslist and I can apply for it. Hope they don't call Burger King and find out I got fired.

— *miketheking*

20. 20. September 5, 2007 2:43 pm [Link](#)

No wonder we're losing the damn war.

— *Henry Porter*

21. 21. September 5, 2007 2:49 pm [Link](#)

Somewhere another Tim McVeigh is drooling. Let us remember that the Tim McVeigh's of the world live among us, not in the caves of Pakistan.

Americans seem disinterested in real threats from inside the U.S. or in the possibility for a serious nuclear accident. Our deranged American public would rather be mesmerized by senators and their alleged toilet sex habits, or the monotonous never ending coverage of the death of a large breasted blonde rather than by securing the country or help to deal with the curse of the drought plaguing those of us who live in the South.

— *Jack Lenahan*

22. 22. September 5, 2007 2:49 pm [Link](#)

These same people that Mr Stackhouse derides has kept him free for decades now with a historic record for our defense . Dan is a typical doom and gloomer who picks up on the mistakes and refuses to acknowledge the good done by the US Air Force.

To add as mentioned by the article , even a crash would not have detonated the nukes .Mr Stackhouse stop your whining .In the events that humans partake in , there will be mistakes .

Barry DeWalt

— *Barry DeWalt*

23. 23. September 5, 2007 2:52 pm [Link](#)

How could the plane have contained some number of warheads "between" 5 and 6? Was some airman going kwazy with a reciprocating saw? Inquiring Minds Want to Know!

— *George Smiley*

24. 24. September 5, 2007 2:52 pm [Link](#)

We can only hope that the safeguards in place to prevent just such an occurrence are reviewed, revised and implemented. It is relatively expedient to begin relieving people of command or to penalize those whose actions led to the mistake, however, the greater underlying issue is the number of these weapons in our arsenal. If we have so many that we "occasionally" misplace them for a "few" hours at a time, perhaps we should consider reducing our stockpile. After all, could you imagine "misplacing" a nuclear warhead if we only had one?

— *Derrick Smith*

25. 25. September 5, 2007 2:54 pm [Link](#)

The failures to follow procedure should obviously result in discipline, but it seems a little strange to be wondering about any special "danger" caused by flying nuclear weapons around on an aircraft designed as a nuclear bomber. Hasn't the Air Force made innumerable flights of this type over the last 60 years?

— *steve*

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August 31

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Robert Mackey is The Lede's editor and main blogger. [Read more.](#)

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