



Directorate of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Policy
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Our Reference: 21-06-2005-094719-001

Date: 19 July 2005

Dear [REDACTED]

**YOUR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST ABOUT THE UK NUCLEAR
DETERRENT**

I am responding to your Freedom of Information request of 21 June for information about various aspects of the 'independent use and control of Britain's nuclear arsenal'.

In line with the approach I proposed in my e-mail to you of 28 June, I have focused on the specific questions you set out, as your broader request for documentation raises difficult issues, in terms of the amount of research required, the consequent cost (which would rapidly reach the £600 cost limit), and the likely engagement of some exemptions under the Act. As I noted, the information you are seeking is highly classified and we would generally regard information of this kind as coming within the exemptions I have mentioned. As I also noted, no other state with nuclear weapons discloses very much information on such subjects. As a result, it was possible that after expending effort up to the appropriate limit we would find little, if any information in the form of copies of original documents that could be disclosed. I took your response of 30 June to be agreement that I should proceed on that basis.

Turning now to your specific questions:

1. Can I be provided with information which gives me the protocols, rules and regulations under which the British government is able to use its nuclear deterrent?

The detailed procedures for the use of UK nuclear weapons are highly classified and their disclosure would prejudice the effectiveness of the UK's deterrent by giving an adversary an insight into UK decision-making processes, hence damaging UK defence interests. This information is therefore exempt information under section 26 of the Freedom of Information Act. We have considered whether it would be in the public interest nonetheless to disclose the information, but have concluded that it would not, given the substantial prejudice that could flow from disclosure of such information..

However, I can confirm that UK political control is maintained over the UK nuclear deterrent at all times, and that in particular only the Prime Minister can authorise the use of UK nuclear weapons. As the Prime Minister has explained in a Parliamentary Answer

(*Official Report*, 9 March 2004, col 1434w), the use of nuclear weapons would be subject to the application of the general rules of international law, including those regulating the inherent right of self-defence and the conduct of hostilities.

2. Does the government of the United States of America have any involvement in the use of nuclear weapons by the British government?

No. But in the event of the contemplated use of UK nuclear weapons for NATO purposes, procedures exist to allow all NATO Allies, including the US, to express views on what was being proposed. The final decision on whether or not to use nuclear weapons in such circumstances, and if so how, would, however, be made by the nuclear power concerned.

3. Can the government of the USA prevent, veto or forbid the UK to use its own nuclear weapons?

No.

4. Does the British government have to tell the US government if it intends to use nuclear weapons?

No. But the US would be involved in any consultation process at NATO as described in the answer to your second question.

5. If the British government plans to change, modify or alter either its arsenal, or the rules under which the arsenal operates, does the US government need to be informed?

No, but the UK services and maintains the Trident missiles it draws from the commingled US/UK pool of missiles to precisely the same standards as does the US. The UK would not seek to modify any of its Trident missiles so that they were different from others in that commingled pool.

In line with the understanding between Prime Minister Macmillan and President Kennedy which is recorded in the *Statement on Nuclear Defence Systems, December 21, 1962* (published at the time as Cmnd 1915), which led to the US/UK Polaris Sales Agreement of April 1963 (Cmd 2108), the UK nuclear forces delivered by missiles procured from the US under the Agreement (including as modified for Trident) are all assigned to NATO, subject to the right of the UK Government to use them for non-NATO purposes in circumstances of supreme national emergency. The 1962 statement to which I refer says on this point (paragraph 9): 'The Prime Minister made it clear that except where Her Majesty's Government may decide that supreme national interests are at stake, these British forces will be used for the purposes of international defence of the western Alliance in all circumstances.' In July 1980, Mrs Thatcher stated in an exchange of letters with President Carter that 'The successor to the Polaris force will be assigned to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, like the Polaris force; and except where the United Kingdom Government may decide that supreme national interests are at stake, the successor force will be used for the purposes of international defence of the Western alliance in all circumstances.' This exchange of letters was published as Cmnd 7979. Likewise, in an exchange of letters in March 1982 dealing with the procurement of the Trident II missile (published as Cmnd 8517), Mrs Thatcher said: 'Like the Polaris force, and consistently with the agreement reached in 1980 on the supply of Trident I missiles, the United Kingdom Trident II force will be assigned to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation; and except where the United

Kingdom Government may decide that supreme national interests are at stake, this successor force will be used for the purposes of international defence of the Western alliance in all circumstances.'

The declaration of these weapons to NATO does not change the fact that UK nuclear weapons remain under UK national control, and subject to the authority of the Prime Minister, at all times.

6. Does the British government have any control, say, veto or advisory role in the rules under which the USA's nuclear arsenal is governed and operated?

No. But the UK would be involved in any consultation process at NATO as described in the answer to your second question.

I hope that this information is helpful.

I will be arranging for a copy of this letter, with your details and mine redacted, to be placed in the FOI Reading Room on the MoD's website.

If you are dissatisfied with the information I have provided or you wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of this request, then please contact me in the first instance. Should you remain dissatisfied, then you may apply for an internal review by contacting the Director of Information Exploitation, 6th Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB.

If you are still unhappy following an internal review, you may take your complaint to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website, <http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk>. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
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Reference: D/SEFPOL/17/13/1

FOI Reference:
03-02-2005-145211-024

Date: 16 February 2005

NUCLEAR WEAPON ACCIDENTS

Dear XXXXXXXXXXXX,

I refer to your request for information under the Freedom of Information Act dated 3 February 2005, which asked for: 'Information held by your department concerning accidents involving British nuclear weapons since their introduction into service.' Annex A provides details of UK nuclear weapons accidents and incidents since 1960. This information was placed in the Library of both Houses of Parliament in October 2003.

Given the lapse of over 40 years in some cases, I should explain that the amount of information held on both the accidents and incidents is limited. I would also like to point out that information which serves to confirm a past picture of the operational patterns, transportation routes and deployed locations of nuclear weapons will continue to have a bearing on the security of current and future operations. This policy is essential to safeguard the operational effectiveness and security of our nuclear deterrent and it is the reason why we Neither Confirm Nor Deny (NCND) the presence of nuclear weapons at any particular time or location.

If this information does not address your requirements or you wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of this request, then you should contact the undersigned in the first instance. Should you remain dissatisfied, then you may apply for an internal review by contacting the Director of Information Exploitation, 6th Floor, MOD Main Building Whitehall, SW1A 2HB.

If you are still unhappy following an internal review, you may take your complaint to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website, <http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk>.

Finally, I should like to confirm that there has never been an occurrence involving a UK nuclear weapon which has represented any threat to public safety.

I hope this is helpful.

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UK NUCLEAR WEAPON SAFETY SINCE 1960

On 17 July 2001, the Secretary of State for Defence published a table outlining the circumstances of the seven accidents involving British nuclear weapons that have occurred since 1966, none of which have involved the release of radioactive material. An unclassified summary of a report by Sir Ronald Oxburgh (then Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence) into all aspects of nuclear safety published in 1992 referred to “some twenty” accidents and incidents since 1960. Part 1 of the table below provides summary descriptions of the seven accidents and, where the information is still available, of any subsequent investigation and follow-up action. Part 2 of the table provides similar descriptions of other events (or “incidents”) included in the Oxburgh report, defined as an unplanned occurrence which did not constitute an accident but were reported in the interests of safety, or because they were likely to attract public or media attention.

Section 1 – Accidents

An accident is defined in the Oxburgh report as “an unplanned occurrence involving the destruction of, or damage, or suspected damage to, a nuclear weapon which has resulted in actual or potential hazard to life or property, or which may have impaired nuclear safety”. There are two categories:

Category 1: in which there are reasonable grounds for concluding that no release of radioactive material has occurred.

Category 2: in which a release of radioactive material has been detected, or the nature or severity of the occurrence is such that the possibility of a release cannot be excluded. **There has never been a Category 2 accident involving a British nuclear weapon.**

	Date	Location	Cause and description	Results of any enquiry and subsequent action
1	April 1973	Near the Royal Naval Armament Depot (RNAD) Coulport.	A Scottish Electricity Board Land Rover reversed into a RAF nuclear weapon load carrier transporting nuclear warheads for Polaris missiles. Minor damage was caused to the load carrier. The weapons were not damaged.	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action.
2	February 1974	Off Malta.	Two Mk44 torpedoes which were being removed from a storage rack fell a few inches onto a WE177 weapon. There was some superficial scratching on the plastic protective strips on the edges of the weapon’s rear tail fin. There was no damage to the weapon itself.	Investigation of the incident concluded that the torpedo handling equipment was incorrectly rigged and modifications were made to the equipment as a result.
3	1974	At sea	The diaphragm of a missile tube compressed on to a Polaris missile. There was no damage to missile or warheads.	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action. But see below on the similar occurrence at serial 5.
4	August 1977	RNAD Coulport	While a Polaris missile was being lifted during re-alignment, the threads on a securing pin stripped due to the incorrect assembly of a hoist fixture. The missile fell a few inches but did not impact on any other object. There was no damage to missile or warheads.	After an enquiry, improvements in relevant documentation, test procedures, inspection and working practices were implemented.

5	1981	At sea	A number of missile diaphragms compressed onto Polaris missiles. There was no damage to missiles or warheads.	An enquiry determined that the incident was due to procedural error. A modification to the design of the missile tube pressurisation was made to prevent a recurrence of the problem.
6	August 1983	M8 near Glasgow	A RAF nuclear weapon load carrier carrying two warheads for Polaris missiles was involved in a collision with a private car. Minor damage was caused to the load carrier. There was no damage to the warheads.	No blame was apportioned to the load carrier driver. No information is now available on any other action that may have been taken in response to this occurrence.
7	January 1987	Wiltshire	A RAF nuclear weapon load carrier carrying two WE177 nuclear weapons, seeking to avoid a stationary private vehicle, left the road after skidding on ice and rolled on to its side. A second carrier, which was also carrying two weapons, skidded on the road and came to rest partly off the road. The containerised weapons were not damaged. Minor damage was caused to the first load carrier.	A Board of Inquiry found that all relevant orders, instructions and operating procedures were compiled with and all personnel concerned showed adequate care. No person was held blameworthy.

Section 2 – Additional incidents referred to in the Oxburgh report, 1992

As defined in the Oxburgh report, an “incident” was an unplanned occurrence which did not constitute an accident “...but which need[ed] to be reported in the interests of safety, or because it [was] likely to attract the attention of the public or the media”.

	Date	Location	Cause and description	Results of any enquiry/subsequent action
8	1960	Lincolnshire	A RAF nuclear weapon load carrier forming part of a convoy experienced a brake failure on an incline and overturned. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon. [This event has some similarities to entries 1,6 and 7 in Section 1 but pre-dates the current reporting system. As acknowledged in 2001, it is unclear on the limited information still available whether, in today’s terms, it would be categorised as an accident.]	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action.
9	1963	RAF base in Lincolnshire	A rear trolley of a nuclear weapon transport became unhitched. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action.
10	1963	Lincolnshire/South Yorkshire	Brake failure on a nuclear weapon load carrier. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action.
11	March 1974	Cyprus	A spurious radiation monitor alarm. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	Modification was necessary to the pre-use check procedure of the monitor.
12	November 1974	Base in Germany	Hoist cable of a jib crane slipped on its drum and allowed a WE177 in its container to fall a short distance onto its trolley. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action.
13	1982	At sea	Damage to some nuclear weapon containers during transfer. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	In the light of these occurrences, CINCFLEET made a number of recommendations regarding weapon transfers.
14	May 1984	Base in Germany	A WE 177 nuclear weapon in its container was being moved on a trolley. The container had not been correctly secured and fell about 1 metre from the trolley during transit. The weapon casing suffered superficial damage from a toolbox which was fitted as standard to the inside of the container.	As a result of this occurrence, the toolbox was removed from all WE177 weapon containers.
15	June 1985	Near Glasgow	Brake failure on a nuclear weapon load carrier. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action.

16	December 1987	Royal Naval Armament Depot (RNAD) Coulport	Human error on the part of a crane driver following the development of a defect on a crane led to a missile colliding with trailer supports. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	After an enquiry, substantial changes in management responsibilities, training, command and control and consultation with the Royal Navy were implemented.
17	August 1988	Off Hong Kong	Minor collision of a non-UK vessel with a moored UK vessel which was carrying nuclear weapons. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action.
18	September 1988	Somerset	A road traffic accident involving an unloaded nuclear weapon convoy. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action.
19	December 1991	M25 in Hertfordshire	Mechanical failure of a RAF nuclear weapon load carrier. There was no damage to any nuclear weapon.	No specific record is now available of any enquiry or follow-up action.

NOTES

In addition to the false alarm in Cyprus recorded at serial 11, which was the only such case specifically mentioned in the Oxburgh report, MoD is aware of a further 6 false alarms reported during the period covered by the report, one of which was also in Cyprus.

Work carried out after the Strategic Defence Review also identified one further event early in 1960 which was not referred to by Oxburgh but has some similarities with incidents listed above:

In January 1960, a component in a Red Beard weapon on board an aircraft carrier at sea jammed following its removal for routine testing. The component was removed for examination. There was an initial concern that the assembly might have overheated but Atomic Weapons Research Establishment were able to determine that this had not been the case and that there were no safety implications. The problem on the carrier was caused by incorrect manufacture of the support equipment used to remove the component. This was subsequently corrected and there was no recurrence.

London Workshop Participants:

Mr. Ken Aldred OBE (workshop speaker), Centre for Defence Studies
 Mr. Andrew Barlow, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
 Prof. Frank Barnaby, Technical Advisor to the Oxford Research Group
 Rt. Hon. Menzies Campbell CBE QC MP PPC (luncheon speaker)
 Adm. Richard Cobold, Royal United Services Institute
 Mr. Michael Codner, Royal United Services Institute
 Mr. James de Waal, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
 Ms. Sue Embler Edwards, Ministry of Defence
 Dr. Jonathon Eyal, Royal United Services Institute
 Mr. David Fisher, Ministry of Defence
 Air Marshall Sir Timothy Garden
 Commodore Tim Hare, Ministry of Defence
 Ms. Natalia Jimenez, International Programs and Studies, University of Illinois
 Ms. Rebecca Johnson (workshop speaker), The Acronym Institute
 Mr. Oliver Meier (workshop speaker), VERTIC
 Mr. Tom Milne, Pugwash UK
 Dr. Dinshaw Mistry (workshop speaker), Stanford University
 Dr. Steve Pullinger (session chair) ISISUK
 Mr. Nick Richy, Oxford Research Group
 Ms. Sheila Roberts (workshop supervisor), University of Illinois
 Prof. Joseph Rotblat
 Rt. Hon. Malcolm Savidge MP (luncheon speaker)
 Prof. Amy Sands (workshop speaker), Monterey Institute of International Studies
 Mr. Paul Schulte, Ministry of Defence
 Mr. Matthew Shaps, Ministry of Defence
 Mr. James Sharp, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
 Mr. Steven Simon (session chair) International Institute for Strategic Studies
 Prof. John Simpson, Montbatten Institute of Strategic Studies
 Prof. Cliff Singer (workshop speaker), University of Illinois

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