The C-17A Has Been Cleared to Transport B61-12 Nuclear Bomb to Europe

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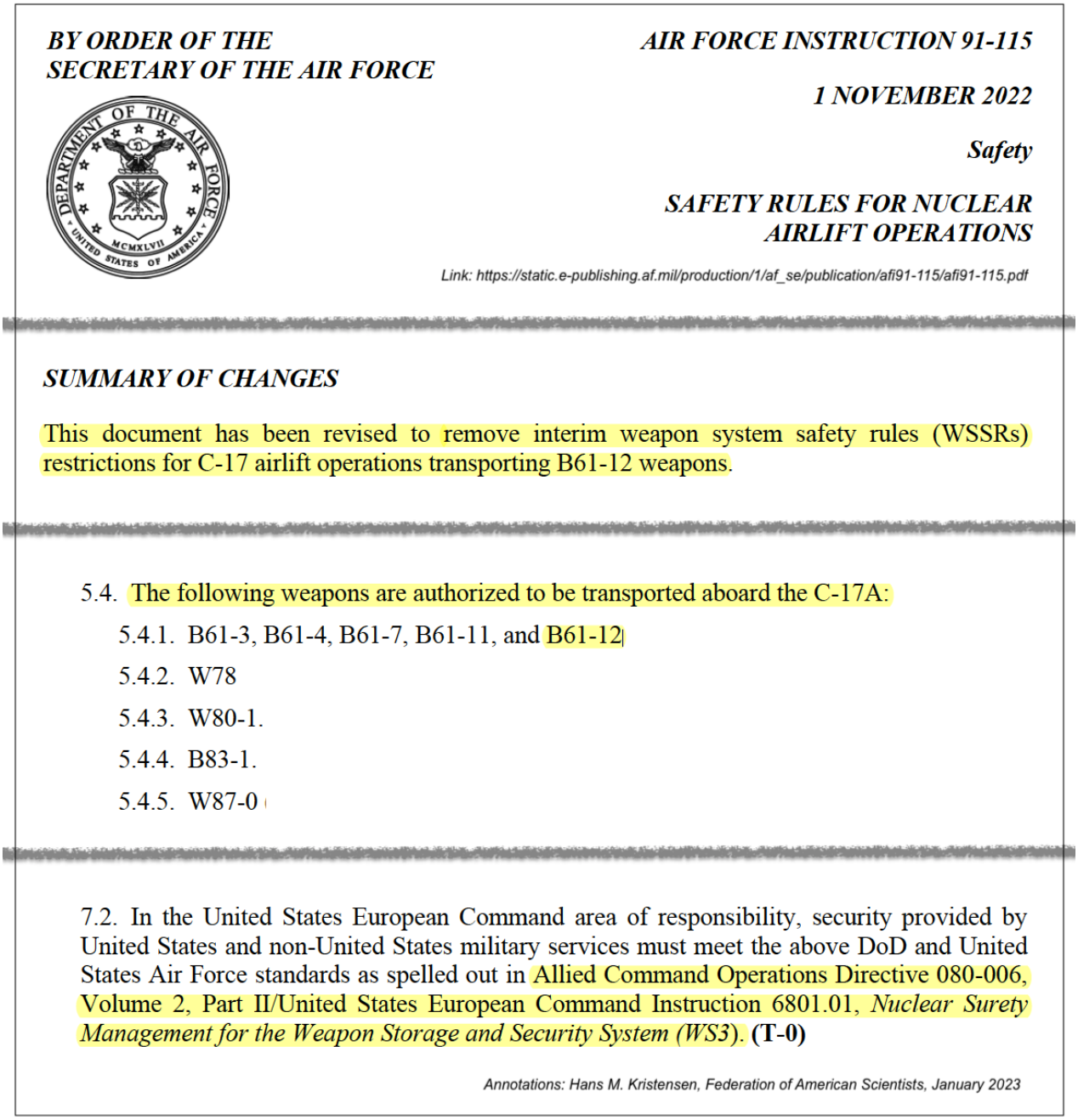
In November 2022, the Air Force updated its safety rules for airlift of nuclear weapons to allow the C-17A Globemaster III aircraft to transport the new B61-12 nuclear bomb.

The update, accompanied by training and certification of the aircraft and crews, cleared the C-17A to transport the newest U.S. nuclear weapon to bases in the United States and Europe.



BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE

AIR FORCE INSTRUCTION 91-115

1 NOVEMBER 2022

Safety

SAFETY RULES FOR NUCLEAR AIRLIFT OPERATIONS

Link: https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_se/publication/afi91-115/afi91-115.pdf

SUMMARY OF CHANGES

This document has been revised to remove interim weapon system safety rules (WSSRs) restrictions for C-17 airlift operations transporting B61-12 weapons.

5.4. The following weapons are authorized to be transported aboard the C-17A:

5.4.1. B61-3, B61-4, B61-7, B61-11, and B61-12

5.4.2. W78

5.4.3. W80-1.

5.4.4. B83-1.

5.4.5. W87-0

7.2. In the United States European Command area of responsibility, security provided by United States and non-United States military services must meet the above DoD and United States Air Force standards as spelled out in Allied Command Operations Directive 080-006, Volume 2, Part II/United States European Command Instruction 6801.01, *Nuclear Surety Management for the Weapon Storage and Security System (WS3)*. **(T-0)**

Annotations: Hans M. Kristensen, Federation of American Scientists, January 2023

An updated USAF Instruction in November 2022 removed restrictions for C-17A transport of the new B61-12 nuclear bomb to bases in the United States and Europe.

The C-17As of the 62nd Airlift Wing at Joint Base Lewis-McChord serve as the Prime Nuclear Airlift Force (PNAF), the only airlift wing that is authorized to transport the Air Force's nuclear warheads.

The updated Air Force instruction does not, as inaccurately suggested by some, confirm that shipping of the weapons began in December. But it documents some of the preparations needed to do so.

Politico reported in October last year that the US had accelerated deployment of the B61-12 from Spring 2023 to December 2022. Two unnamed US officials said the US told NATO about the schedule in October.

But a senior Pentagon official subsequently dismissed the Politico report, saying "nothing has changed on the timeline. There is no speeding up because of any Ukraine crisis, the B61-12 is on the same schedule it's always been on."

Although the DOD official denied there had been a change in the schedule, he did not deny that transport would begin in December.

Two unarmed B61-12 trainers are loaded on a C-17A during an exercise at Joint Base Lewis-McChord AFB in April 2021. Image: U.S. Air Force.

The B61-12 production scheduled had slipped repeatedly. Initially, the plan was to begin full-scale production in early-2019. By September 2022, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) was still awaiting approval to begin full-scale production. Finally, in October 2022, NNSA confirmed to FAS that the B61-12 was in full-scale production.

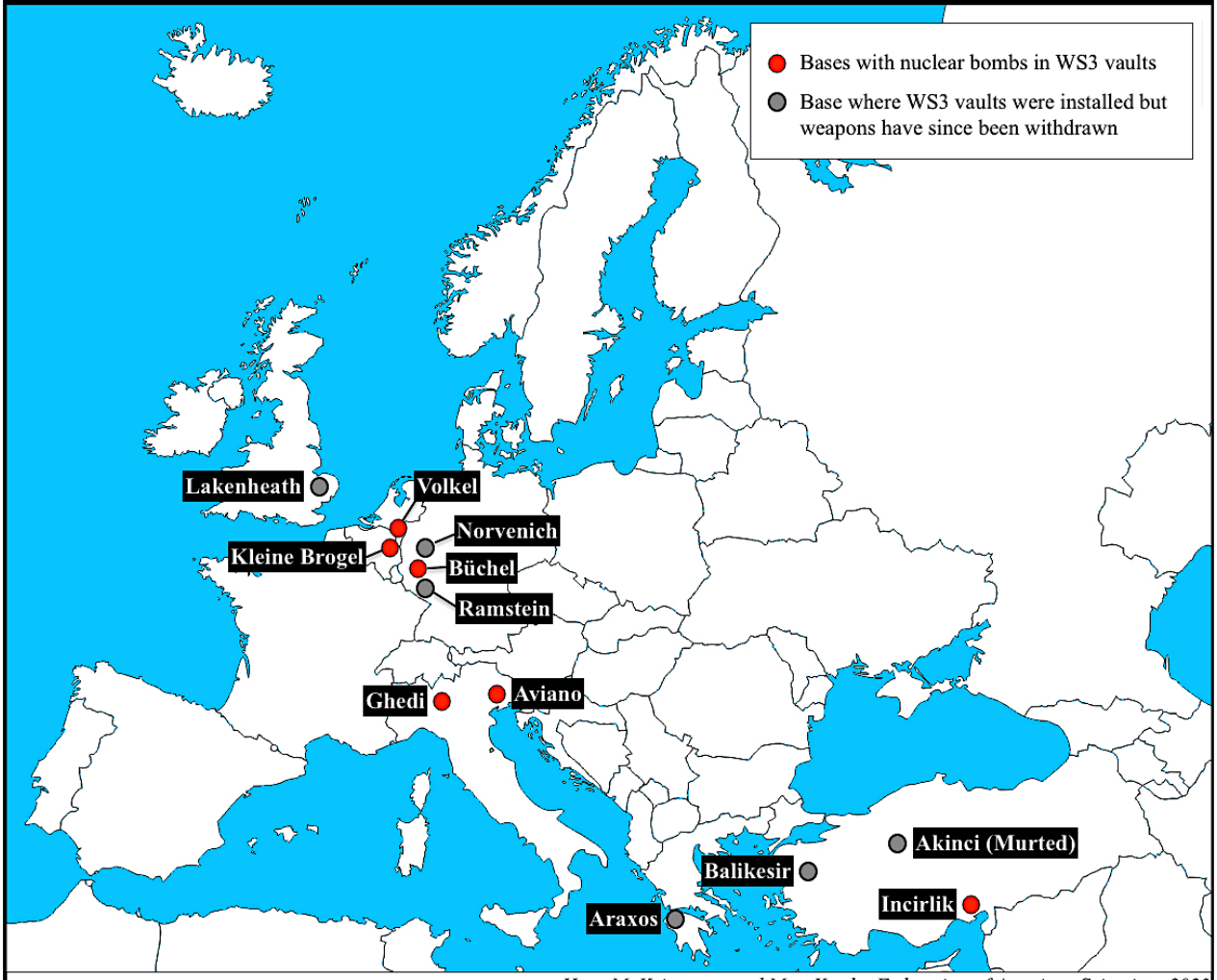
The B61-12 is intended as an upgrade and eventual replacement for all current nuclear gravity bombs, including the B61-3, -4, -7, and probably eventually also the B61-11 and B83-1. To that end, it combines and improves upon various aspects of existing bombs: it uses a modified version of the B61-4 warhead with several lower- and medium-yield options (0.3-50 kilotons). It compensates for its smaller explosive yield (relative to the maximum yields of the B61-7 and -11) by including a guided tail-kit to increase accuracy, as well as a limited earth-penetration capability.

At this point in time, it is unknown if B61-12 shipments to Europe have begun. If not, it appears to be imminent. That said, deployment will probably not happen in one move but gradually spread to more and more bases depending on certification and construction at each base.

There are currently six active bases in five European countries with about 100 B61 bombs present in underground Weapons Storage and Security Systems (WS3) inside aircraft

shelters. A seventh site in Germany (Ramstein Air Base) is active without weapons present and an eighth site – RAF Lakenheath – has recently been added to the list of WS3 sites being modernized. The revitalization of Lakenheath's nuclear storage bunkers does not necessarily indicate that US nuclear weapons will return to UK soil, especially since as recently as December 2021, NATO's Secretary General stated that "we have no plans of stationing any nuclear weapons in any other countries than we already have . . . " However, the upgrade could be intended to increase NATO's ability to redistribute the B61 bombs in times of heightened tensions, or to potentially move them out of Turkey in the future. In addition, four other sites have inactive (possibly mothballed) vaults (see map below).

Estimated U.S. Nuclear Weapons In Europe, 2023



Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, Federation of American Scientists, 2023

Country	Base	Vaults Installed	Vaults Active	Max Bombs	Estimated Bombs
Belgium	Kleine Brogel*	11	11	44	10-15
Germany	Büchel*	11	11	44	10-15
	Ramstein	55	(7)[a]	28	(0)[a]
Italy	Aviano*	18	11[b]	44	20-30
	Ghedi*	11	11	44	10-15
Netherlands	Volkel*	11	11	44	10-15
Turkey	Incirlik*	25	21[c]	84	20-30
United Kingdom	Lakenheath	33	(11)[d]	(44)	(0)[d]
6	**8**	**175[e]**	**76 (94)**	**304 (376)**	**~100[f]**

* Base with nuclear bombs present continuously.
[a] Although 7 vaults are active, Ramstein is thought to serve as a training and backup site and not permanently store weapons.
[b] Only counts as active the 11 shelters that are inside the double-fenced security perimeter added in 2015.
[c] Only counts as active the 21 shelters that are inside the double-fenced security perimeter added in 2015.
[d] Weapons were withdrawn from Lakenheath before 2007. In 2022, it was added to the sites undergoing nuclear storage upgrades and the 48th Wing is conducting nuclear training exercises. It is unknown how many of the 33 vaults will be made active after the upgrade. There are no public indications weapons have been returned to the base yet.
[e] A total of 250 vaults were originally installed in Europe but many bases were later closed, or the vaults mothballed.
[f] The precise number is uncertain but has decreased significantly compared with the 480 weapons that were present in 2000.

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Featured image: C-17As of the 62nd Airlift Wing at Joint Base Lewis-McChord near Seattle have been cleared to transport new B61-12 nuclear bomb. (Source: Federation of American Scientists)

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