

# “Mistakes and Malfunctions” that have Nearly Plunged the World into Nuclear War. The Okinawa Missiles of October

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*John Bordne, a resident of Blakeslee, Penn., had to keep a personal history to himself for more than five decades. Only recently has the US Air Force given him permission to tell the tale, which, if borne out as true, would constitute a terrifying addition to the lengthy and already frightening list of mistakes and malfunctions that have nearly plunged the world into nuclear war.*

The story begins just after midnight, in the wee hours of October 28, 1962, at the very height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Then-Air Force airman John Bordne says he began his shift full of apprehension. At the time, in response to the developing crisis over secret Soviet missile deployments in Cuba, all US strategic forces had been raised to Defense Readiness Condition 2, or DEFCON2; that is, they were prepared to move to DEFCON1 status within a matter of minutes. Once at DEFCON1, a missile could be launched within a minute of a crew being instructed to do so.

Bordne was serving at one of four [secret missile launch sites on the US-occupied Japanese island of Okinawa](#). There were two launch control centers at each site; each was manned by seven-member crews. With the support of his crew, each launch officer was responsible for four Mace B cruise missiles mounted with Mark 28 nuclear warheads. The Mark 28 had a yield equivalent to 1.1 megatons of TNT—i.e., each of them was roughly 70 times more powerful than the Hiroshima or Nagasaki bomb. All together, that’s 35.2 megatons of destructive power. With a range of 1,400 miles, the Mace B’s on Okinawa could reach the communist capital cities of Hanoi, Beijing, and Pyongyang, as well as the Soviet military facilities at Vladivostok.

Several hours after Bordne’s shift began, he says, the commanding major at the Missile Operations Center on Okinawa began a customary, mid-shift radio transmission to the four sites. After the usual time-check and weather update came the usual string of code. Normally the first portion of the string did not match the numbers the crew had. But on this occasion, the alphanumeric code matched, signaling that a special instruction was to follow. Occasionally a match was transmitted for training purposes, but on those occasions the second part of the code would not match. When the missiles’ readiness was raised to DEFCON 2, the crews had been informed that there would be no further such tests. So this time, when the first portion of the code matched, Bordne’s crew was instantly alarmed and, indeed, the second part, for the first time ever, also matched.

At this point, the launch officer of Bordne's crew, Capt. William Bassett, had clearance, to open his pouch. If the code in the pouch matched the third part of the code that had been radioed, the captain was instructed to open an envelope in the pouch that contained targeting information and launch keys. Bordne says all the codes matched, authenticating the instruction to launch all the crew's missiles. Since the mid-shift broadcast was transmitted by radio to all eight crews, Capt. Bassett, as the senior field officer on that shift, began exercising leadership, on the presumption that the other seven crews on Okinawa had received the order as well, Bordne proudly told me during a three-hour interview conducted in May 2015. He also allowed me to read the chapter on this incident in his unpublished memoir, and I have exchanged more than 50 emails with him to make sure I understood his account of the incident.

By Bordne's account, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Air Force crews on Okinawa were ordered to launch 32 missiles, each carrying a large nuclear warhead. Only caution and the common sense and decisive action of the line personnel receiving those orders prevented the launches—and averted the nuclear war that most likely would have ensued.

*Kyodo News* has reported on this event, but only in regard to Bordne's crew. In my opinion, Bordne's full recollections—as they relate to the other seven crews—need to be made public at this time as well, because they provide more than enough reason for the US government to search for and release in timely fashion all documents relating to events in Okinawa during the Cuban Missile Crisis. If true, Bordne's account would add appreciably to historical understanding, not just of the Cuban crisis, but of the role accident or miscalculation have played and continue to play in the Nuclear Age.

### **What Bordne contends.**

Bordne was interviewed extensively last year by Masakatsu Ota, a senior writer with *Kyodo News*, which describes itself as the leading news agency in Japan and has a worldwide presence, with more than 40 news bureaus outside that country. In a March 2015 article, Ota laid out much of Bordne's account and wrote that “[a]nother former US veteran who served in Okinawa also recently confirmed [Bordne's account] on condition of anonymity.” Ota has subsequently declined to identify the unnamed veteran, because of the anonymity he'd been promised.

Ota did not report portions of Bordne's story that are based on telephone exchanges that Bordne says he overheard between his launch officer, Capt. Bassett, and the other seven launch officers. Bordne, who was in the Launch Control Center with the captain, was directly privy only to what was said at one end of the line during those conversations—unless the captain directly relayed to Bordne and the other two crew members in the Launch Control Center what another launch officers just said.

With that limitation acknowledged, here is Bordne's account of the ensuing events of that night:

Immediately after opening his pouch and confirming that he had received orders to launch all four nuclear missiles under his command, Capt. Bassett expressed the thought that something was amiss, Bordne told me. Instructions to launch nuclear weapons were supposed to be issued only at the highest state of alert; indeed this was the main difference between DEFCON 2 and DEFCON1. Bordne recalls the captain saying, “We have not received the upgrade to DEFCON1, which is highly irregular, and we need to proceed with caution.

This may be the real thing, or it is the biggest screw up we will ever experience in our lifetime.”

While the captain consulted by phone with some of the other launch officers, the crew wondered whether the DEFCON1 order had been jammed by the enemy, while the weather report and coded launch order had somehow managed to get through. And, Bordne recalls, the captain conveyed another concern coming from one of the other launch officers: A preemptive attack was already under way, and in the rush to respond, commanders had dispensed with the step to DEFCON1. After some hasty calculations, crew members realized that if Okinawa were the target of a preemptive strike, they ought to have felt the impact already. Every moment that went by without the sounds or tremors of an explosion made this possible explanation seem less likely.

Still, to hedge against this possibility, Capt. Bassett ordered his crew to run a final check on each of the missiles’ launch readiness. When the captain read out the target list, to the crew’s surprise, three of the four targets were *not* in Russia. At this point, Bordne recalls, the inter-site phone rang. It was another launch officer, reporting that his list had two non-Russian targets. Why target non-belligerent countries? It didn’t seem right.

The captain ordered that the bay doors for the non-Russian-targeted missiles remain shut. He then cracked open the door for the Russia-designated missile. In that position, it could readily be tipped open the rest of the way (even manually), or, if there were an explosion outside, the door would be slammed shut by its blast, thereby increasing the chances that the missile could ride out the attack. He got on the radio and advised all other crews to take the same measures, pending “clarification” of the mid-shift broadcast.

Bassett then called the Missile Operations Center and requested, on the pretense that the original transmission had not come through clearly, that the mid-shift report be retransmitted. The hope was that this would help those at the center to notice that the original transmission’s coded instruction had been issued in error and would use the retransmission to rectify matters. To the whole crew’s consternation, after the time-check and weather update, the coded launch instruction was repeated, unaltered. The other seven crews, of course, heard the repetition of the instruction as well.

According to Bordne’s account—which, recall, is based on hearing just one side of a phone call—the situation of one launch crew was particularly stark: All its targets were in Russia. Its launch officer, a lieutenant, did not acknowledge the authority of the senior field officer—i.e. Capt. Bassett—to override the now-repeated order of the major. The second launch officer at that site reported to Bassett that the lieutenant had ordered his crew to proceed with the launch of its missiles! Bassett immediately ordered the other launch officer, as Bordne remembers it, “to send two airmen over with weapons and shoot the [lieutenant] if he tries to launch without [either] verbal authorization from the ‘senior officer in the field’ or the upgrade to DEFCON 1 by Missile Operations Center.” About 30 yards of underground tunnel separated the two Launch Control Centers.

At this most stressful moment, Bordne says, it suddenly occurred to him that it was very peculiar such an important instruction would be tacked to the end of a weather report. It also struck him as strange that the major had methodically repeated the coded instruction without the slightest hint of stress in his voice, as if it were little more than a boring nuisance. Other crew members agreed; Bassett immediately resolved to telephone the major and say that he needed one of two things:

- Raise the DEFCON level to 1, or
- Issue a launch stand-down order.

Judging from what Bordne says he heard of the phone conversation, this request got a more stress-filled reaction from the major, who immediately took to the radio and read out a new coded instruction. It was an order to stand down the missiles ... and, just like that, the incident was over.

To double-check that disaster had really been averted, Capt. Bassett asked for and received confirmation from the other launch officers that no missiles had been fired.

At the beginning of the crisis, Bordne says, Capt. Bassett had warned his men, "If this is a screw up and we do not launch, we get no recognition, and this never happened." Now, at the end of it all, he said, "None of us will discuss anything that happened here tonight, and I mean *anything*. No discussions at the barracks, in a bar, or even here at the launch site. You do not even write home about this. Am I making myself perfectly clear on this subject?"

For more than 50 years, silence was observed.

### **Why the government should look for and release records. Immediately.**

Now wheelchair-bound, Bordne has tried, thus far without success, to track down records related to the incident on Okinawa. He contends that an inquest was conducted and each launch officer questioned. A month or so later, Bordne says, they were called upon to participate in the court martial of the major who issued the launch orders. Bordne says Capt. Bassett, in the only breach of his own secrecy command, told his crew that the major was demoted and forced to retire at the minimum service period of 20 years, which he was on the verge of fulfilling anyway. No other actions were taken—not even commendations for the launch officers who had prevented a nuclear war.

Bassett died in May 2011. Bordne has taken to the Internet in an attempt to locate other launch crew members who may be able to help to fill in his recollections. The National Security Archives, a watchdog group based at George Washington University's Gelman Library, has filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Air Force, seeking records relating to the Okinawa incident, but such requests often do not result in a release of records for years, if ever.

I recognize that Bordne's account is not definitively confirmed. But I find him to have been consistently truthful in the matters I could confirm. An incident of this import, I believe, should not have to rest on the testimony of one man. The Air Force and other government agencies should proactively make any records in their possession relating to this incident available in their entirety—and quickly. The public has long been presented a false picture of the dangers inherent in nuclear weapon deployment.

The entire world has a right to know the entire truth about the nuclear danger it faces.

### **Note from the editor of the bulletin.org**

*As this article was being considered for publication, Daniel Ellsberg, who was a Rand consultant to the Defense Department at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, wrote a lengthy email message to the Bulletin, at the request of Tovish. The message asserted, in part: "I feel it's urgent to find out*

*whether Bordne's story and Tovish's tentative conclusions from it are true, given the implications of its truth for present dangers, not only past history. And that can't await the 'normal' current handling of a FOIA request by the National Security Archive, or the Bulletin. A congressional investigation will only take place, it appears, if the Bulletin publishes this very carefully hedged report and its call for the elaborate documentation reported to exist from an official inquest to be released from inexcusably (though very predictably) prolonged classification."*

*During this same time period, Bruce Blair, a research scholar at Princeton University's Program on Science and Global Security, also wrote an email message to the Bulletin. This is the entirety of the message: "Aaron Tovish asked me to weigh in with you if I believe his piece should be published in the Bulletin, or for that matter any outlet. I do believe it should be, even though it has not been fully verified at this stage. It strikes me that a first-hand account from a credible source in the launch crew itself goes a long way toward establishing the plausibility of the account. It also strikes me as a plausible sequence of events, based on my knowledge of nuclear command and control procedures during the period (and later). Frankly, it's not surprising to me either that a launch order would be inadvertently transmitted to nuclear launch crews. It's happened a number of times to my knowledge, and probably more times than I know. It happened at the time of the 1967 Middle East war, when a carrier nuclear-aircraft crew was sent an actual attack order instead of an exercise/training nuclear order. It happened in the early 1970s when [the Strategic Air Command, Omaha] retransmitted an exercise ... launch order as an actual real-world launch order. (I can vouch for this one personally since the snafu was briefed to Minuteman launch crews soon thereafter.) In both of these incidents, the code check (sealed authenticators in the first incident, and message format validation in the second) failed, unlike the incident recounted by the launch crew member in Aaron's article. But you get the drift here. It just wasn't that rare for these kinds of snafus to occur. One last item to reinforce the point: The closest the US came to an inadvertent strategic launch decision by the President happened in 1979, when a NORAD early warning training tape depicting a full-scale Soviet strategic strike inadvertently coursed through the actual early warning network. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was called twice in the night and told the US was under attack, and he was just picking up the phone to persuade President Carter that a full-scale response needed to be authorized right away, when a third call told him it was a false alarm.*

*I understand and appreciate your editorial cautiousness here. But in my view, the weight of evidence and the legacy of serious nuclear mistakes combine to justify publishing this piece. I think they tip the scales. That's my view, for what it's worth."*

*In an email exchange with the Bulletin in September, Ota, the Kyodo News senior writer, said he has "100 percent confidence" in his story on Bordne's account of events on Okinawa "even though there are still many missing pieces."*

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