

# The Mystery of Minot: Loose nukes and a cluster of dead airmen raise troubling questions

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The unauthorized Aug. 29/30 cross-country flight of a B-52H Stratofortress armed with six nuclear-tipped AGM-29 Advanced Cruise missiles, which saw these 150-kiloton warheads go missing for 36 hours, has all the elements of two Hollywood movies. One would be a thriller about the theft from an armed weapons bunker of six nukes for some dark and murky purpose. The lead might be played by Matt Damon. The other movie would be a slapstick comedy about a bunch of bozos who couldn't tell the difference between a nuclear weapon and a pile of dummy warheads. The lead might be played by Adam Sandler, backed by the cast of "Police Academy III."

So far, the Pentagon, which has launched two separate investigations into the incident, seems to be assuming that it is dealing with the comedy version, saying that some incredible "mistake" led to nuclear weapons being taken inadvertently from a weapons-storage bunker, loaded into launch position on a bomber, and flown from North Dakota to Louisiana.

To date, more than a month after the incident, Pentagon investigators have completely ignored a peculiar cluster of six deaths, during the weeks immediately preceding and following the flight, of personnel at the two Air Force bases involved in the incident and at Air Force Commando Operations headquarters.

The operative assumption of the investigations appears to be that an Air Force decision to store nuclear, conventional, and dummy warheads in the same bunker and one mistake by weapons handlers initiated a chain of errors and oversights that led to the flight.

On Sept. 23, the Washington Post, in a story based upon interviews with military officials, many of them unidentified, suggested that the first known case of nuclear warheads leaving a weapons-storage area improperly was the result of two mistakes. The first, the article suggested, was a decision by the Air Force to permit the storing of nuclear weapons in the same highly secure and constantly guarded sod-covered bunkers — known as "igloos" — as non-nuclear weapons and dummy warheads (something that had never been allowed in the past).

The second was some as yet unidentified mistake by weapons handlers at Minot to mount six nuclear warheads onto six of the 12 Advanced Cruise Missiles that had been slated to be flown to Barksdale AFB for destruction. Those missiles and the six others, part of a group of 400 such missiles declared obsolete and slated for retirement and disassembly, should have been fitted with dummy warheads also. The Post article quotes military sources as saying that once the mistake was made, a cascade of errors followed as weapons handlers, ground

crews, and the B-52 crew skipped all nuclear protocols, assuming they were dealing with dummy warheads.

The problem with this theory is that dummy warheads don't look the same as the real thing. The real warheads, called W80-1's, are shiny silver, a color which is clearly visible through postage-stamp-sized windows on the nosecone covers that protect them on the missiles. In addition, the mounted warheads are encased in a red covering as a second precaution.

Apparently the nukes (which can be set to explode at between 5 kilotons and 150 kilotons) were easily spotted by a Barksdale AFB ground crew when they went out to the plane on the tarmac hours after it landed. If the Barksdale ground crew, which had absolutely no reason to suspect it was looking at nuclear-tipped missiles, easily spotted the "error," why did everyone at Minot miss it, as claimed?

Clearly, whoever loaded the six nukes on one B-52 wing pylon, and whoever mounted that unit on the wing, knew or should have known that they were dealing with nukes — and absent an order from the highest authority in Washington, loading such nukes on a bomber was against all policy. The odds of randomly putting six nukes all on one pylon, and six dummies on the other, are 1:924. And how curious that the pilot, who is supposed to check all 12 missiles before flying, checked only the pylon containing the dummy warheads.

Various experts familiar with nuclear-weapons-handling protocols express astonishment at what happened on Aug. 29 and 30. After all, over the course of more than six decades, the protocols for handling nuclear arms have called for at least two people at every step, with paper trails, bar codes, and real-time computer tracking of every warhead in the arsenal. Nothing like this has been known to have happened before. Air Force Gen. Eugene Habiger, who served as US Strategic Command chief from 1996 to 1998, told the Post, "I have been in the nuclear business since 1966 and am not aware of any incident more disturbing."

Philip Coyle, a senior advisor at the Center for Defense Information who served as assistant secretary of defense in the Clinton administration, calls the incident "astonishing" and "unbelievable." He says, "This wasn't just a mistake. I've counted, and at least 20 things had to have gone wrong for this to have occurred."

Bruce Blair, a former Air Force nuclear launch officer who is now president of the World Security Institute, says that the explanation of the incident as laid out in the Washington Post, and in the limited statements from the Air Force and Department of Defense, which call it a "mistake," are "incomplete." He notes that no mention has been made as to whether the nukes in question, which had been pre-mounted on a pylon for attachment to the B-52 wing, had their PAL (permission action link) codes unlocked to make them operational, or whether a system on board the plane that would ordinarily prevent an unauthorized launch had been activated. "For all we know, these missiles could have been fully operational," he says.

The Air Force and Department of Defense are refusing to answer any questions about such matters.

Meanwhile, there are those six deaths. On July 20, 1st Lt. Weston Kissel, a 28-year-old B-52 pilot from Minot, died in a motorcycle accident while on home leave in Tennessee.

Another Minot B-52 pilot, 20-year-old Adam Barrs, died on July 5 in Minot when a car he was

riding in, driven by another Minot airman, Stephen Garrett, went off the road, hit a tree, and caught fire. Airman Garrett was brought to the hospital in critical condition and has since been charged with negligent homicide.

Two more Air Force personnel, Senior Airman Clint Huff, 29, of Barksdale AFB, and his wife Linda died on Sept. 15 in nearby Shreveport, Louisiana, when Huff reportedly attempted to pass a van in a no-passing zone on his motorcycle, and the van made a left-hand turn, striking them.

Then there are two reported suicides, which both occurred within days of the flight. One involved Todd Blue, a 20-year-old airman who was in a unit that guarded weapons at Minot. He reportedly shot himself in the head on Sept. 11 while on a visit to his family in Wytheville, Virginia. Local police investigators termed his death a suicide.

The second suicide, on Aug. 30, was John Frueh, a special forces weather commando at the Air Force's Special Operations command headquartered at Hurlburt AFB in Florida. Hurlburt's website says, "Every night, as millions of Americans sleep peacefully under the blanket of freedom," Air Force Special Operations commandos work "in deep dark places, far away from home, risking their lives to keep that blanket safe."

Frueh, 33, a married father of two who had just received approval for promotion from captain to major, reportedly flew from Florida to Portland, Oregon, for a friend's wedding. He never showed up. Instead, he called on Aug. 29, the day the missiles were loaded, from an interstate pull-off just outside Portland to say he was going for a hike in a park nearby. (It is not clear why he was at a highway rest stop as he had no car.) A day later, back in Portland, he rented a car at the airport, again calling his family. After he failed to appear at the wedding, his family filed a missing person's report with the Portland police. The Sheriff's Department in remote Skamania County, Washington, found Frueh's rental car ten days later on the side of a road nearly 120 miles from the airport in a remote area of Badger Peak. Search dogs found his body in the woods. His death was ruled a suicide, though neither the sheriff's investigator nor the medical examiner would give details. What makes this alleged suicide odd, however, is that the sheriff reports that Frueh had with him a knapsack containing a GPS locator and a videocam — odd equipment for someone intent on ending his life.

Of course, it could be that all six of these deaths are coincidences — all just accidents and personal tragedies. But when they occur around the time six nuclear-tipped missiles go missing in a bizarre incident, the likes of which the Pentagon hasn't seen before, one would think investigators would be on those cases like vultures on carrion. In fact, police and medical examiners in the Frueh and Blue cases say no federal investigators, whether from DOD or FBI, have called them. Worse still, because the B-52 incident got so little media attention — no coverage in most local news — none of those investigating the accidents and suicides even knew about it or about the other deaths.

"It would have been interesting to know all that when I was examining Mr. Blue's body," says Virginia coroner Mike Stoker, "but no one told me about any of it or asked me about him."

"If we had known that several people had died under questionable circumstances, it might have affected how we'd look at a body," says Don Phillips, the sheriff's deputy in Washington State who investigated the Frueh death. "But nobody from the federal

government has ever contacted us about this.”

“Certainly, in a case like this, the suicides should be a red flag,” says Hans Kristensen, a nuclear-affairs expert with the Federation of American Scientists. “It’s wild speculation to think that there might be some connection between the deaths and the incident, but it certainly should be investigated.”

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