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85th Congress, 2d session

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NIKE EXPLOSION AT MIDDLETOWN, N.J.

On May 22, 1958, an explosion occurred at Battery B of the 526th AAA (Nike) Missile Battalion at Middletown, N.J. It caused the death of six Army enlisted men of the battery, and four Department of Army Ordnance civilians. One warrant officer of the battery and one civilian of the Department of Army Ordnance were seriously injured, but have since recovered. The launching equipment of one of the three sections was damaged, and eight missiles were destroyed.

On July 30, 1958, this subcommittee held an executive session, with Senator Henry M. Jackson as the acting chairman. Maj. Gen. D. E. Beach, U.S. Army, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, and members of his staff were present. The purpose of the hearings was to ascertain the cause of the accident and to review the existing procedures in connection with safety precautions at the various missile bases.

Testimony revealed that immediately after the explosion, the Department of the Army dispatched teams to the site to investigate the cause of the accident. It was disclosed that there were three separate activities taking place in the vicinity of section A at the time of the explosion.

The first activity was that the battery personnel were checking missiles in preparation for going on a higher state of alert. This check is known as command calibration, and is an operation performed routinely at least once a week.

The second activity involved repair of launcher No. 3 in section A by an Ordnance team composed of two civilians. This operation consisted of unbolting the hydraulic erecting arm piston assembly and replacing it with a new one. This is a simple operation and requires no electrical tools, welding tools, or other heat-producing agents. There was no missile on the launcher being repaired.

The third activity was an authorized field modification to the missiles of the battery by another Ordnance team of three civilian employees. This modification had already been performed on about 1,000 missiles throughout the country.

The Army concluded, after careful consideration of all the evidence, that the most probable cause of the explosion was the crushing or rupturing of a detonating cap. There was no evidence of gross carelessness, smoking, inattention to the operations, or any other possible cause, such as sabotage.

The commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Defense Command has, since the explosion, issued a revision of his "Tactical Standing Operating Procedures Guide." This revision contains instructions with regard to missile movement and locations for various operations to include practice alerts, inspections, demonstrations, modifications, testing, and maintenance. The procedures to be outlined in detail in the revised guide provides for—

(1) Limitations on the number of missiles which may be above ground at any one time when conducting section training, training evaluation, or command calibration.

(2) Upon receiving notice of an impending engagement, sufficient missiles to meet the immediate threat would be brought above ground.

(3) There will be only one missile above ground if operations other than as specified above are performed on a live missile.

Immediately after the explosion occurred, the Department of the Army also sent teams to Middletown to assist in processing all claims for damages to civilian property resulting from the explosion. It was found that all serious damage resulting from the explosion was confined to the area immediately adjacent to the point of the explosion and within the battery boundaries. Damage outside the battery was limited to broken glass and cracked plaster. As of June 25, 1958, there were 98 claims submitted by the residents of the Middletown area. Of these 98 claims, 95 had been approved and 3 are pending. The total amount of damage for the 98 claims is \$13,711.05.

Testimony disclosed that at the present time the Ajax missile is being replaced by the Hercules missile which has a capability of carrying either a higher explosive or an atomic warhead. The missile bases provide air defense protection to a large number of American cities. Testimony also disclosed that the Army, among its safety precautions, has a safety committee, composed of military experts in the guided missile field, to insure that every precaution is taken to prevent the probability of an accident.

Although this safety committee does exist, the subcommittee suggested that the Army should consider the advisability of establishing an independent safeguard committee, composed of civilian experts, to serve as a double check on the entire operation. The very nature of the weapons involved demand that every safety precaution that is humanly possible be put into effect on a continuing basis.

Wilber M. Brucker, Secretary of the Army, heartily agreed with the subcommittee's recommendation, and on August 20, 1958, formally established such a committee, composed of five distinguished civilian experts representing science and industry. Mr. Brucker charged the committee with reviewing the adequacy of safety, not only for the Nike-Hercules, but for all Army air defense systems in the United States, both presently deployed and those to be deployed in the future. The findings and recommendations of the committee are to include, but not to be limited to—

- (1) Safety features of the warheads.
- (2) Standard operating procedures.
- (3) Procedures employed during transit of missiles and warheads.
- (4) Safety features of the missile systems.
- (5) Command controls.

PROJECT SEA WEED (U.S. AIR FORCE)

In March 1958 a subcommittee staff member visited the 314th Air Division in Korea and became aware of the condition of Sea Weed stockage at U.S. Air Force bases in Korea. Sea Weed is an Air Force term applied to the acquisition of war-readiness materiel at Air Force bases overseas. Project Sea Weed was conceived to preposition essential equipment so as to avoid the necessity for moving it by air or surface means in event of deployment of Air Force tactical or strategic elements to other than their home bases overseas. Under the new concept of nuclear warfare, the supplies and equipment necessary for immediate defense and retaliation strikes must be in place at wartime operating bases and ready for immediate use on D-day.