

1

00:00:00,000 --> 00:00:29,920

Revealed in upcoming episodes of this program are the contents of a recently

2

00:00:29,920 --> 00:00:36,920

unearthed repository classified by the secret government, the Phenomenon Archives.

3

00:00:59,920 --> 00:01:29,840

How can you lose something as conspicuous as an atomic bomb?

4

00:01:29,840 --> 00:01:35,440

Despite white-knuckle standoffs between the US and Russia, the Cold War's 40 years of high-stakes

5

00:01:35,440 --> 00:01:40,840

cat and mouse miraculously never reached the devastating reality of a nuclear war. Perhaps

6

00:01:40,840 --> 00:01:45,400

the real triumph of the Cold War wasn't who prevailed, but that neither country incinerated

7

00:01:45,400 --> 00:01:47,040

millions of its own citizens.

8

00:01:47,040 --> 00:01:51,720

In the 1950s we thought if it was nuclear it was great. We took our troops out into

9

00:01:51,720 --> 00:01:56,000

the trenches in Nevada, we'd set off a nuclear bomb, boom, that would go off, and they'd

10

00:01:56,000 --> 00:02:00,560

stand up and look at the cloud and then wham the shockwave would come over them. It was

11

00:02:00,560 --> 00:02:04,600

risky, it was naive, but those were the practices of the 50s.

12

00:02:04,600 --> 00:02:11,400

SAC was the aggressor, and the air defense command was of course the defender. These were very

13

00:02:11,400 --> 00:02:16,400

realistic exercises. Of course the only thing that had practice was our own bombers, and

14

00:02:16,400 --> 00:02:21,120

sometimes things happen.

15

00:02:21,120 --> 00:02:26,760

When these started as a May Day, it appears that we had just had our mid-air collision,

16

00:02:26,760 --> 00:02:32,080

so we decided to go out over the ocean and drop that Mark 15 nuclear weapon.

17

00:02:32,080 --> 00:02:38,520

One pound of plutonium, it's enough to give every single person on Earth lung cancer.

18

00:02:38,520 --> 00:02:40,720

We are talking about a time bomb here.

19

00:02:40,720 --> 00:02:44,240

It was just a nuclear weapon after all, they could always get more of them from the atomic

20

00:02:44,240 --> 00:02:49,600

energy commission. A little remarkable, I mean you would go to greater lengths if you

21

00:02:49,600 --> 00:03:05,480

dropped something down the sewer or you know lost something in your garden.

22

00:03:05,480 --> 00:03:13,760

On February 13th, 1950, America loses its first nuclear bomb. A B-36 bomber halfway

23

00:03:13,760 --> 00:03:18,960

through its training mission discovers fire in three of its engines. The pilot opens his

24

00:03:18,960 --> 00:03:26,200

bomb bay and ejects a 40,000 pound atomic bomb into the Pacific, just west of Fugit

25

00:03:26,200 --> 00:03:34,880

Sound, Washington. In 1961, a B-52 carrying two hydrogen bombs develops a fuel leak, catches

26

00:03:34,880 --> 00:03:42,520

fire and explodes. Both bombs are thrown clear as the plane crashes into open farmland. One

27

00:03:42,520 --> 00:03:51,680

bomb is recovered, but the thermonuclear secondary of the other is never found. In 1956, four

28

00:03:51,680 --> 00:04:00,120

B-47s take off for Van Guerre Air Force Base in Morocco. One carries two nuclear capsules.

29

00:04:00,120 --> 00:04:07,120

Preparing for mid-air refueling, it disappears mysteriously into a layer of clouds. A land

30

00:04:07,120 --> 00:04:13,280

in sea search begins over the Sahara Desert, but no trace of the bomber, its crew or its

31

00:04:13,280 --> 00:04:20,000

nuclear cargo, is ever found. These are a few among the dozen documented incidents of

32

00:04:20,000 --> 00:04:27,000

the Cold War wherein the U.S. military, either through mishap or human error, lost or abandoned

33

00:04:27,000 --> 00:04:34,880

armed nuclear weapons. On February 4th, 1958, over Savannah, Georgia, the pilot of a strategic

34

00:04:34,920 --> 00:04:41,920

air command B-47 bomber armed with a nuclear weapon faces the ultimate in military decisions.

35

00:04:41,920 --> 00:04:48,880

Should he or should he not drop an atomic bomb? Confounding the pilot's decision is the reality

36

00:04:48,880 --> 00:04:55,160

that he is neither over a remote testing facility nor enemy territory, but flying slightly offshore

37

00:04:55,160 --> 00:05:02,160

of a thriving American city. His bomb, a Mark 15, is a relatively new, lightweight design.

38

00:05:02,160 --> 00:05:09,160

Eleven feet in length, three feet around and 7,600 pounds, the Mark 15 is half the weight

39

00:05:09,520 --> 00:05:16,520

of earlier bombs, yet 500 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima 13 years

40

00:05:16,800 --> 00:05:21,800

earlier. Halfway across the globe, fleeing to the

41

00:05:21,800 --> 00:05:28,800

banks of the Savannah River, lies Savannah, Georgia. In 1733, British General James Edward

42

00:05:29,040 --> 00:05:35,040

Oglethorpe charts the 13th and final crown colony, calling it Georgia, in honor of King

43

00:05:35,040 --> 00:05:42,040

George II. He designates Savannah as its capital. General Oglethorpe creates a master plan for

44

00:05:42,040 --> 00:05:49,040

the city, marking out a grid of broad thoroughfares, lavish squares and ornate fountains. In 1793,

45

00:05:50,600 --> 00:05:57,600

Eli Whitney invents the cotton gin in Savannah, revolutionizing the large-scale cultivation

46

00:05:59,160 --> 00:06:05,440

of cotton and sparking an economic boom for the South. Savannah becomes a prosperous industrial

47

00:06:05,440 --> 00:06:10,600

center and port. During the Civil War, Union General William

48

00:06:10,600 --> 00:06:15,600

Tecumseh Sherman leads his legendary march from Atlanta to the sea, burning everything

49

00:06:15,600 --> 00:06:22,600

in his path. In December 1864, he and his 70,000 Union troops arrive in Savannah. Falling

50

00:06:23,240 --> 00:06:30,240

prey to its charm, Sherman spares this city from flames. That Christmas, he sends a telegram

51

00:06:31,160 --> 00:06:37,360

to President Lincoln, quote, I beg to present to you as a Christmas present, the city of

52

00:06:37,360 --> 00:06:41,720

Savannah. Although 15 miles inland from the Atlantic

53

00:06:41,720 --> 00:06:47,760

Ocean, Savannah is nevertheless considered a coastal town. The region, shaped more by

54

00:06:47,760 --> 00:06:54,160

water than land, is traversed by a labyrinth of small rivers and meandering streams, criss-crossing

55

00:06:54,160 --> 00:06:59,960

their way to the Atlantic. One of America's best kept secrets of the Cold

56

00:06:59,960 --> 00:07:05,440

War is that the world's largest nuclear bomber force was circling the skies of major U.S.

57

00:07:05,440 --> 00:07:12,440

towns and cities 24 hours a day. In 1956, President Eisenhower clandestinely approves

58

00:07:13,120 --> 00:07:19,720

a policy enabling American air defense forces to carry and use nuclear weapons. This new

59

00:07:19,720 --> 00:07:25,640

special arm of the Air Force is named the Strategic Air Command, or SAC. During the

60

00:07:25,640 --> 00:07:31,440

course of the Cold War, SAC operates with near total autonomy. At any given moment of

61

00:07:31,440 --> 00:07:37,320

any day or night, bombers are in the air, prepared to attack Soviet targets at a moment's

62

00:07:37,320 --> 00:07:44,400

notice. Some 3,100 different Strategic Air Command aircraft are flown during this period.

63

00:07:44,400 --> 00:07:50,840

Over 2,000 of these are capable of carrying nuclear weapons. Essentially, America is at

64

00:07:50,840 --> 00:07:55,000

war, but the American public knows little about it.

65

00:07:55,000 --> 00:08:01,320

No man can know at what hour, if ever, our defensive organization may be put to the ultimate

66

00:08:01,320 --> 00:08:08,120

test. Because our purpose is entirely defensive, we must be ready at the earliest possible

67

00:08:08,120 --> 00:08:15,280

moment. Only an aggressor, a good name the day and hour of attack.

68

00:08:15,280 --> 00:08:20,280

The Strategic Air Command runs training missions constantly, using American cities as mocked

69

00:08:20,280 --> 00:08:27,200

Soviet targets. In these war games, SAC bombers attack cities like Baltimore, New York, and

70

00:08:27,200 --> 00:08:34,320

Chicago. During a one-month period, SAC bombers fly 600 missions against the city of San Francisco

71

00:08:34,320 --> 00:08:41,120

alone. To inject realism into the training operations, bombers flying these mocked strikes

72

00:08:41,120 --> 00:08:46,640

are frequently armed with nuclear weapons. This maintains preparedness in the event of

73

00:08:46,640 --> 00:08:54,280

a surprise Soviet attack. Time is of the essence in the nuclear age, where cities, even civilizations,

74

00:08:54,280 --> 00:09:00,200

can be wiped out in a matter of seconds.

75

00:09:00,200 --> 00:09:05,720

Their nuclear-equipped bombers patrol daily the very edges of the H-hour control line,

76

00:09:05,720 --> 00:09:12,600

the fail-safe point, a frightening imaginary line drawn in the sky. The point of no return

77

00:09:12,600 --> 00:09:21,960

before nuclear Armageddon would begin.

78

00:09:21,960 --> 00:09:26,920

If U.S. citizens had known just how aggressive their military forces had grown, high-risk

79

00:09:26,920 --> 00:09:31,840

SAC practices like 15-minute ground alerts and 24-hour aerial missions with nukes over

80

00:09:31,840 --> 00:09:36,600

native soil, they would have been halted immediately.

81

00:09:36,600 --> 00:09:43,920

Nine o'clock p.m., Homestead Air Force Base, Florida. Major Howard Richardson, first Lieutenant

82

00:09:43,920 --> 00:09:48,880

Robert Lagerström and Lieutenant Leland Willard of Strategic Air Command's 19th Bomb

83

00:09:48,880 --> 00:09:55,760

Wing, scrambled into their B-47 bomber, not knowing if tonight is a genuine Soviet attack

84

00:09:55,760 --> 00:09:57,840

or just another drill.

85

00:09:57,840 --> 00:10:05,120

You live down in that alert shack for, say, 10 days at a time. You just about had to sleep

86

00:10:05,120 --> 00:10:11,480

with your flying suit on because you had 15 minutes to get dressed, get out to the aircraft

87

00:10:11,480 --> 00:10:12,480

as fast as possible.

88

00:10:12,480 --> 00:10:19,160

And all the pilots and crew have to do is get into their positions. Their helmets are

89

00:10:19,160 --> 00:10:26,960

in place. The parachutes are ready to snap on. Their flight plans, maps, everything is

90

00:10:26,960 --> 00:10:27,960

in position.

91

00:10:27,960 --> 00:10:33,080

Fifty-fifteen minutes was the time it would take for the missile to leave in Russia to

92

00:10:33,080 --> 00:10:40,080

hit the United States. All ready you had to do was hit the switch to sock the engines.

93

00:10:40,080 --> 00:10:43,440

And you were off.

94

00:10:43,440 --> 00:10:50,720

During World War II, Major Howard Richardson flew 35 B-17 bombing missions over Nazi Germany.

95

00:10:50,720 --> 00:10:56,400

He piloted the Mississippi Miss, not unlike the Memphis Bell, popularized in the Hollywood

96

00:10:56,400 --> 00:11:02,320

movie. With over 3,000 hours of flying time, he is one of the most experienced pilots in

97

00:11:02,320 --> 00:11:09,000

the wing. But when they scramble into their B-47 on the night of February 4, 1958, no

98

00:11:09,000 --> 00:11:13,920

one aboard imagines what an important role that experience will play in determining their

99

00:11:13,920 --> 00:11:16,720

survival.

100

00:11:16,720 --> 00:11:21,120

Richardson and his co-pilot, Robert Leigerstrom, ready their bomber for departure as they taxi

101

00:11:21,120 --> 00:11:27,000

out under the runway in formation with other B-47 crews from their unit. Richardson pushes

102

00:11:27,000 --> 00:11:33,200

all six engines to full power. Once airborne, Major Richardson is joined by a second B-47

103

00:11:33,200 --> 00:11:38,840

bomber. Tonight, Major Richardson and his crew are taking part in a complex military

104

00:11:38,840 --> 00:11:45,400

training mission. Their orders are to zigzag over the continental United States, then bear

105

00:11:45,400 --> 00:11:51,800

down on their war game target, the small town of Radford, Virginia. Their B-47 is playing

106

00:11:51,800 --> 00:11:57,760

the role of an attacking Russian bomber and a training U.S. airspace. Between Richardson

107

00:11:57,760 --> 00:12:04,480

and his target is a defensive screen of F-86 Sabre jet fighter planes and assorted air

108

00:12:04,480 --> 00:12:19,000

defense missile batteries, each with orders to shoot his bomber down.

109

00:12:19,000 --> 00:12:23,800

Like a hundred American cities before her, the sleepy berg of Radford, Virginia was the

110

00:12:23,800 --> 00:12:29,780

unwitting center of this exercise, the surrogate test target for the destruction of a parallel

111

00:12:29,780 --> 00:12:35,960

Soviet city. The citizens of Radford knew nothing about this nuclear-armed chess game

112

00:12:35,960 --> 00:12:41,580

being played out over their heads. In the game, a B-47 would drop its fully armed Mark

113

00:12:41,580 --> 00:12:47,720

15 atomic bomb on Radford. The B-47 was a ground-breaking airplane. Every airliner you

114

00:12:47,720 --> 00:12:53,980

see today looks like a B-47. Swept wings, swept tails, pods for engines, a very sleep-licking

115

00:12:53,980 --> 00:13:02,580

airplane. They were real fast aircraft and I had to have some experience before you could

116

00:13:02,580 --> 00:13:08,780

really do what it was a matter of fact. Retired Lieutenant Colonel Tony Race has flown nearly

117

00:13:08,780 --> 00:13:16,620

6,500 hours in a B-47, more than anyone else in the history of the aircraft. It was an

118

00:13:16,620 --> 00:13:27,220

unforgiving airplane. If you made a mistake, you could be in big trouble. There were many

119

00:13:27,220 --> 00:13:35,740

restrictions that you had to keep in the back of your mind, especially when something went

120

00:13:35,740 --> 00:13:41,900

wrong with the airplane. You were doing something that wasn't normal. And we had quite a few

121

00:13:41,900 --> 00:13:48,380

emergency procedures that we had to go through in the course of all that flying time. Once

122

00:13:48,380 --> 00:13:54,540

out over the Gulf of Mexico, they refuel from a KC-135 tanker. One of the most difficult

123

00:13:54,540 --> 00:13:59,700

things you can do is air-refuel an airplane. As you watch it from the ground, it couldn't

124

00:13:59,700 --> 00:14:03,300

look simpler. I mean, you see two airplanes aligned in the sky and they hardly seem to

125

00:14:03,300 --> 00:14:11,100

move. You had to fly formation with this guy up there and he's trying to fly straight

126

00:14:11,100 --> 00:14:19,220

as he can. You lose about 10 or 15 pounds in one refueling. That took about 20 minutes

127

00:14:19,220 --> 00:14:29,500

to take on fuel. And we'd usually take on 50, 60, 70 thousand pounds. I went out over

128

00:14:29,500 --> 00:14:36,220

the Gulf of Mexico and flew up towards Minneapolis, St. Paul. And flying just about to the Canadian

129

00:14:36,220 --> 00:14:42,020

border because we wanted a mission, simulated mission, just like it would be going to Russia.

130

00:14:42,020 --> 00:14:46,340

It would take quite a number of hours to get over there. And then we'd turn southeast

131

00:14:46,340 --> 00:14:52,500

and go toward our target. Nearby, at Charleston Air Force Base, South Carolina, another klaxon

132

00:14:52,500 --> 00:15:00,860

sounds, alerting a squadron of F-86 Sabrejet fighters to intercept incoming Soviet bombers.

133

00:15:00,860 --> 00:15:05,300

Just as sack bombers were always at the ready for a retaliatory bombing strike against the

134

00:15:05,300 --> 00:15:10,780

Soviet Union, the tactical air command, or TAC, was charged with defending the United

135

00:15:10,780 --> 00:15:17,100

States against an invasion. In these training missions, sack would target a site for simulated

136

00:15:17,100 --> 00:15:24,100

bombing and TAC would attempt to shoot the bombers down. Piloting one of TAC's F-86

137

00:15:24,100 --> 00:15:29,300

Sabrejets is 24-year-old First Lieutenant Clarence Stewart.

138

00:15:29,300 --> 00:15:37,100

My primary job was to defend the U.S. against foreign bombers, aggressors, and at that time,

139

00:15:37,100 --> 00:15:40,420

of course, it was the Russian, it was the main threat.

140

00:15:40,420 --> 00:15:48,700

Tonight, it is Stewart's mission to find Richardson's B-47 and shoot it down. Stewart's F-86

141

00:15:48,700 --> 00:15:54,540

is a magnificent piece of technology, a proven midkiller during the Korean War.

142

00:15:54,540 --> 00:16:00,460

The F-86 was our main air-to-air interceptor, and in the 50s, we were starting to attach

143

00:16:00,460 --> 00:16:06,500

radar to fighters. It was a great advantage to the pilot to be able to see a target well

144

00:16:06,500 --> 00:16:10,780

ahead of his own visual range, but it was hard to use.

145

00:16:10,780 --> 00:16:16,740

You've got your head down in a scope and you're steering a dot, which is telling you which

146

00:16:16,740 --> 00:16:22,140

way to steer. And so you're flying the airplane to the dot.

147

00:16:22,140 --> 00:16:25,180

Pallets don't like to put their heads in hoods. Pallets like to have their heads up

148

00:16:25,180 --> 00:16:29,140

and looking out of the cockpit. All the while, and he's moving through the sky at 3, 400

149

00:16:29,140 --> 00:16:32,860

knots, they like to keep their eyes out, they call it.

150

00:16:32,860 --> 00:16:38,620

Major Richardson accelerates his B-47 bomber to maximum cruising speed.

151

00:16:38,620 --> 00:16:43,380

While the B-47s and the B-52s are out there flying their bombing mission, F-86s are up

152

00:16:43,380 --> 00:16:47,420

trying to intercept them, trying to attack them. Both units are being graded on how well

153

00:16:47,420 --> 00:16:50,700

they do.

154

00:16:50,700 --> 00:16:58,460

Our guys trained in defensive measures. The copilot whipped around with his remote-controlled

155

00:16:58,460 --> 00:17:03,260

20s, and he was ready to blast anybody that came close.

156

00:17:03,260 --> 00:17:07,780

SAC wanted everything to be as realistic as possible. The time in the air, the distance

157

00:17:07,780 --> 00:17:13,820

flown, the fuel burn, the number of air refuelings, almost everything a pilot had to do to fly

158

00:17:13,820 --> 00:17:19,460

a real mission against the Soviet Union. A B-47 or B-52 would fly its combat mission,

159

00:17:19,580 --> 00:17:24,540

and oftentimes end up over an electronic bombing range.

160

00:17:24,540 --> 00:17:29,140

After successfully throwing off two enemy fighters, Major Richardson starts down the

161

00:17:29,140 --> 00:17:32,940

checklist in preparation to simulate dropping his bomb.

162

00:17:32,940 --> 00:17:37,860

You think of just dropping a bomb as pulling the lever and now it goes, but it was surprisingly

163

00:17:37,860 --> 00:17:42,860

hard and complicated to ready a nuclear bomb and drop it. You had to pull the lanyard,

164

00:17:42,860 --> 00:17:46,700

to pull the safety and switches out. You had to select between an air burst or a ground

165

00:17:47,100 --> 00:17:52,220

burst. You had an error and a war option switch that the commander of the aircraft, the front

166

00:17:52,220 --> 00:17:56,220

cedar or the left cedar, had to activate. Of course you had the codes that had to be

167

00:17:56,220 --> 00:18:00,300

authenticated. There were just a lot of things to do.

168

00:18:00,300 --> 00:18:06,700

In an actual attack, the peaceful city of Radford would be incinerated. As the bomb

169

00:18:06,700 --> 00:18:13,380

bay doors snap shut, the B-47 speeds away at 450 miles per hour to avoid the concussion

170

00:18:13,420 --> 00:18:20,420

created by the exploding bomb. Major Richardson directs his aircraft into safe territory,

171

00:18:20,420 --> 00:18:27,420

crossing over an imaginary line that signifies the end of the mock war, or so he believes.

172

00:18:27,420 --> 00:18:32,420

Richardson instructs navigator Willard to turn off the electronic detection gear. With

173

00:18:32,420 --> 00:18:36,860

their mission accomplished, the crew can enjoy a leisurely flight homeward.

174

00:18:36,860 --> 00:18:42,860

It was sort of a relaxed feeling once we got back to friendly territory and we were just

175

00:18:43,140 --> 00:18:46,180

waiting. The crew is on down to homestead.

176

00:18:46,180 --> 00:18:51,180

But first Lieutenant Clarence Stewart is still on the attack. Pressing his face into his

177

00:18:51,180 --> 00:18:58,180

radar hood, Stewart sees a blip on his radar screen reading three miles, dead ahead.

178

00:18:58,180 --> 00:19:03,900

I had developed a technique where I climbed a little bit higher and converted the altitude

179

00:19:03,900 --> 00:19:10,060

and speed. The airplane, sure enough, when we turned in on it, turned away from us. When

180

00:19:10,060 --> 00:19:17,060

I realized that I was extremely close to the airplane, I felt the wash from the airplane,

181

00:19:17,060 --> 00:19:22,500

the turbulence that came out of him, and looked up and there was a sky full of airplanes.

182

00:19:22,500 --> 00:19:26,860

Rather Lieutenant Clarence Stewart was staring directly into the exhaust nozzle of one of

183

00:19:26,860 --> 00:19:32,580

the bomber's six engines. All Stewart could do was quickly jerk his F-86 fighter into

184

00:19:32,580 --> 00:19:39,580

a wing over and pray that he would miss hitting the B-47. A B-47 bomber carrying a fully

185

00:19:39,580 --> 00:19:46,580

armed nuclear bomb. Stewart didn't miss.

186

00:19:49,700 --> 00:19:55,220

It was a time when technology was young and theories of aerodynamics were still evolving.

187

00:19:55,220 --> 00:19:59,520

It was a time when the promise of the jet age was tempered by the harsh reality of flawed

188

00:19:59,520 --> 00:20:06,520

aircraft designs and sudden crashes. Strategic air command bombers crashed, burned, broke

189

00:20:06,520 --> 00:20:11,600

in the sky, spiraled into the ground, lost wings and tails and suffered every manner

190

00:20:11,600 --> 00:20:18,600

of pilot error imaginable. But some crashes were different. Some involved nuclear bombs.

191

00:20:18,600 --> 00:20:25,600

We'd been running the exercises all day and thought the exercise had terminated.

192

00:20:26,100 --> 00:20:31,560

We were supposed to be in friendly territory. Our fighters weren't supposed to be making

193

00:20:31,560 --> 00:20:36,400

passes at us at this time. But we did see some fighters. They were going underneath us,

194

00:20:36,400 --> 00:20:41,720

going eastward and then some were going west above us. We didn't think much of it.

195

00:20:41,720 --> 00:20:47,240

Stewart's radar indicates he is still a safe distance away when his F-86 jet fighter suddenly

196

00:20:47,240 --> 00:20:51,400

slams into the right wing of Richardson's B-47 bomber.

197

00:20:51,400 --> 00:20:58,400

I was taking a field reading, so I was facing kind of that direction to the right and we

198

00:20:59,360 --> 00:21:02,960

got hit. And then all of a sudden the copilot myself

199

00:21:02,960 --> 00:21:07,960

saw a flash of light to our right. So we knew what would happen. We knew it had to be a

200

00:21:07,960 --> 00:21:14,960

fighter that hit us. You can see the engine was hanging 45 degrees

201

00:21:15,240 --> 00:21:18,920

nose up. The crash is knocked off the bomber's right wing

202

00:21:18,920 --> 00:21:25,920

tank, gouging large holes in its fuselage and tail.

203

00:21:26,920 --> 00:21:32,920

Then it was a matter of reactions. We were all prepared to leave the airplane if we had to.

204

00:21:33,920 --> 00:21:38,920

He started as a May Day. I was a procedure May Day, May Day. He got in contact with Hunter,

205

00:21:38,920 --> 00:21:44,920

told him to advise the SAC headquarters that it appears that we just had a mid-air collision.

206

00:21:44,920 --> 00:21:50,920

My airplane had exploded and had blown the right wing off the airplane. So two other

207

00:21:50,920 --> 00:21:54,800

flight members reported that I went down with the aircraft.

208

00:21:54,800 --> 00:21:59,200

In the aftermath of the collision and explosion, the other pilots in his squadron failed to

209

00:21:59,200 --> 00:22:02,760

notice Clarence Stewart eject from his aircraft.

210

00:22:02,760 --> 00:22:09,760

Managed to get the shoot open shortly after I got clear of the seat. Took about 32 minutes

211

00:22:10,440 --> 00:22:17,440

I think to get on the ground. The ground temperature of that night was minus 25 degrees Fahrenheit.

212

00:22:18,440 --> 00:22:23,440

Then I landed in a clearing in this big wooded area.

213

00:22:23,440 --> 00:22:28,440

I spent the next about 35 days in a hospital. Frostbite.

214

00:22:28,440 --> 00:22:34,440

Which is, you don't see many cases of frostbite in South Carolina.

215

00:22:34,440 --> 00:22:40,440

Richardson's B-47 bomber makes an emergency divert to the nearest landing field. The wounded

216

00:22:40,440 --> 00:22:45,440

bomber presents its captain with not only a near impossible landing, but with another

217

00:22:45,440 --> 00:22:50,440

even more troubling challenge. What to do with the nuclear bomb?

218

00:22:50,440 --> 00:22:55,440

We had that left wing tank still on. We had to get rid of that. So I told an navigator

219

00:22:55,440 --> 00:23:00,440

to tell me when we were over a wooded area and not close to the house. He gave me the

220

00:23:00,440 --> 00:23:04,440

go ahead on that. I dropped the left wing tank.

221

00:23:04,440 --> 00:23:09,440

We configured the airplane for a landing to see how it would react. Because we knew that

222

00:23:09,440 --> 00:23:13,440

because of the damage done to the airplane we were going to have to land at a higher speed

223

00:23:13,440 --> 00:23:19,440

than normal. We descended to 20,000 feet. Put the gear down in the flaps and I wanted to see

224

00:23:19,440 --> 00:23:25,440

what speed I could get because I figured if I could get close to 210, 205 I could land

225

00:23:25,440 --> 00:23:31,440

the aircraft safely. Ligersturm radios Hunter and requests clearance for an emergency landing.

226

00:23:31,440 --> 00:23:37,440

But Hunter has more disturbing news for the crew of the B-47. They're extending the runway

227

00:23:37,440 --> 00:23:43,440

at Hunter and there was about a one foot lip, deep lip at the end of the runway. We'd probably

228

00:23:43,440 --> 00:23:48,440

wipe out the gear and be then in a crash landing situation.

229

00:23:48,440 --> 00:23:54,440

So we figured if the aircraft had a jolt and that weapon would have come out from the

230

00:23:54,440 --> 00:23:58,440

bomb bay and just gone right through just like it's going through a gun barrel.

231

00:23:58,440 --> 00:24:05,440

It would mean certain death for the entire crew and a potential nuclear catastrophe for Savannah.

232

00:24:05,440 --> 00:24:11,440

Ligersturm contacts air traffic control at strategic air command headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska.

233

00:24:11,440 --> 00:24:18,440

We told them we were going to jettison hot cargo and it got rather quiet on the radios and in fact

234

00:24:18,440 --> 00:24:22,440

the remark I heard was standby.

235

00:24:22,440 --> 00:24:28,440

The procedure in case you had an emergency like that the first priority was the safety of the crew

236

00:24:28,440 --> 00:24:34,440

so we decided to go out over the ocean and drop that Mark 15 nuclear weapon.

237

00:24:34,440 --> 00:24:41,440

Major Richardson and co pilot Ligersturm execute the weapon release checklist for the second time this day.

238

00:24:41,440 --> 00:24:49,440

Earlier it had been an exercise. The bomb bay doors snap open. The bomb falls away.

239

00:24:49,440 --> 00:24:57,440

They feel a slight jump. The recoil of releasing 7,600 nuclear pounds.

240

00:24:57,440 --> 00:25:02,440

It was part of the World War II mentality to drop a bomb if you had an emergency.

241

00:25:02,440 --> 00:25:08,440

It was called salvoing the bomb. You wanted to get the explosives off the airplane before you attempted the landing.

242

00:25:08,440 --> 00:25:13,440

The worst thing that could happen would be that you'd skid down the runway being golfed in flames

243

00:25:13,440 --> 00:25:17,440

and you would cook off, it's called, you'd cook off the bombs on board.

244

00:25:17,440 --> 00:25:23,440

And while you might have survived the accident, the bombs on board would kill you.

245

00:25:23,440 --> 00:25:28,440

Holding it level and keeping it straight ahead was really a problem.

246

00:25:28,440 --> 00:25:32,440

We got the speed up to 220 knots and we made the approach at that.

247

00:25:32,440 --> 00:25:37,440

When we hit the wheels on the runway we were a little fast so we just skipped up.

248

00:25:37,440 --> 00:25:44,440

And then when we came back down I pulled the brakes.

249

00:25:44,440 --> 00:25:49,440

With their shredded craft now on the ground, the crew learns only after the crash

250

00:25:49,440 --> 00:25:53,440

how close their B-47 had come to breaking apart.

251

00:25:53,440 --> 00:25:59,440

And you just know you're in serious trouble. And you know it might be the end.

252

00:25:59,440 --> 00:26:04,440

But we got the dog gone busy. That's what saw us calm things.

253

00:26:04,440 --> 00:26:08,440

You just got too much to do to even think about getting too scared.

254

00:26:08,440 --> 00:26:15,440

They did find me guilty and they were hand rubbing the gallows to hang my young ass.

255

00:26:16,440 --> 00:26:24,440

And we got a call from the sheriff of the county that my airplane had landed in.

256

00:26:24,440 --> 00:26:28,440

And he said, hey, we found a black object in the back of the canopy.

257

00:26:28,440 --> 00:26:31,440

I said, hold it, that's it right there.

258

00:26:31,440 --> 00:26:39,440

And we got the Nader can and it viewed it and it verified everything that I'd said.

259

00:26:39,440 --> 00:26:44,440

It was later discovered that Lieutenant Stewart and his F-86 fighter jet

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00:26:44,440 --> 00:26:48,440

was flying under different rules of engagement than those given to Major Richardson

261

00:26:48,440 --> 00:26:51,440

in the B-47 bomber.

262

00:26:51,440 --> 00:26:56,440

This was not unconventional. This was a total breach of military protocol.

263

00:26:56,440 --> 00:27:01,440

The F-86 fighter was told that the bomber was still in hostile territory

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00:27:01,440 --> 00:27:04,440

and so was open for attack.

265

00:27:04,440 --> 00:27:08,440

The B-47 bomber, according to its orders, had entered friendly airspace

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00:27:08,440 --> 00:27:11,440

and so had relaxed its vigil.

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00:27:15,440 --> 00:27:20,440

The Air Force investigation that followed would exonerate the F-86 fighter pilot,

268

00:27:20,440 --> 00:27:23,440

Clarence Stewart, because of his faulty radar.

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00:27:23,440 --> 00:27:27,440

Major Howard Richardson was praised and officially commended for his extraordinary flying

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00:27:27,440 --> 00:27:30,440

and for keeping a cool head under conditions of battle.

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00:27:30,440 --> 00:27:35,440

Their ordeal was over, but for Savannah, the problems were just beginning.

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00:27:35,440 --> 00:27:42,440

The Navy immediately started a sea search for the lost bomb, a fully armed nuclear weapon.

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00:27:43,440 --> 00:27:47,440

The bomb jettisoned off the coast of Savannah was a Mark 15.

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00:27:47,440 --> 00:27:55,440

The design was first built in 1953 and test-fired on Bikini Atoll on May 14, 1954.

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00:27:55,440 --> 00:28:00,440

Its yield was 1.4 megatons.

276

00:28:00,440 --> 00:28:08,440

This is about the size of the manaputonium that destroyed Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.

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00:28:09,440 --> 00:28:14,440

And what this represents basically is a sphere of plutonium.

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00:28:14,440 --> 00:28:20,440

And this was also the same kind of configuration that was used at the Trinity device that was detonated in July 1945.

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00:28:20,440 --> 00:28:26,440

And around this sphere, you have layers of high explosives, high explosives,

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00:28:26,440 --> 00:28:28,440

that's a TNT essentially, in the early years.

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00:28:28,440 --> 00:28:34,440

Configured in such a way as to compress this into something maybe the size of a tennis ball.

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00:28:34,440 --> 00:28:36,440

And that's when it ignites.

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00:28:39,440 --> 00:28:48,440

On the morning of February 5, 1958, Savannah unexpectedly finds itself party to an Air Force recovery operation.

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00:28:48,440 --> 00:28:56,440

Offshore, a Navy destroyer prowls the Atlantic waters while Army and Navy personnel comb the beaches and surrounding marshland.

285

00:28:56,440 --> 00:29:02,440

They drag the waters near the Savannah beach and divers from rubber boats search along the river

bottom.

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00:29:03,440 --> 00:29:09,440

On February 12, 7 days after the accident, the Air Force finally issues this press release.

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00:29:09,440 --> 00:29:17,440

The story emphasizes that the jettisoned object presents no risk to the community and that it is completely harmless.

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00:29:17,440 --> 00:29:24,440

On March 11, another nuclear bomb falls from yet another SACB-47.

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00:29:25,440 --> 00:29:32,440

The TNT portion explodes on impact, lasting a crater 75 feet wide and 35 feet deep.

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00:29:32,440 --> 00:29:35,440

This event completely overshadows the Savannah story.

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00:29:35,440 --> 00:29:40,440

With public interest in the Savannah accident waning, the government sees a way out.

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00:29:40,440 --> 00:29:46,440

After searching only three square miles of coastal waters over a period of two months,

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00:29:46,440 --> 00:29:51,440

the military informs the press that the search is at an end.

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00:29:54,440 --> 00:29:58,440

The fact that it's in the Savannah River does pose a bit of concern.

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00:29:58,440 --> 00:30:02,440

I mean, it's not sitting out somewhere where it's not populated.

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00:30:02,440 --> 00:30:05,440

But I don't know exactly what was going through the government's mind.

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00:30:05,440 --> 00:30:10,440

All we have to go on are the few memos that we've been able to obtain that have been declassified

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00:30:10,440 --> 00:30:16,440

that suggest that they felt they did everything they could and decided in the interests of cost effectiveness,

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00:30:16,440 --> 00:30:20,440

apparently, that it just wasn't worth the further effort to try.

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00:30:20,440 --> 00:30:23,440

If it was just a nuclear weapon after all, they could always get more of them from the

301

00:30:23,440 --> 00:30:25,440

Atomic Energy Commission.

302

00:30:25,440 --> 00:30:28,440

After three weeks, the military's search activity dried up.

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00:30:28,440 --> 00:30:30,440

The story just ended.

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00:30:30,440 --> 00:30:33,440

There were no protests, no investigative reports.

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00:30:33,440 --> 00:30:38,440

The military's claim that the loss of an a bomb was harmless soon became the official story,

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00:30:38,440 --> 00:30:44,440

helped along by an obliging media and a Pentagon trying to avoid further embarrassment.

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00:30:45,440 --> 00:30:52,440

Many bombs that were presumed lost have reappeared over the years.

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00:30:52,440 --> 00:30:59,440

In 1988, on the North Shore of Martha's Vineyard, on a beachfront formerly used by the military as a bombing and target range,

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00:30:59,440 --> 00:31:06,440

heavy storms forced dozens of artillery shells, bombs and rockets on to shore.

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00:31:06,440 --> 00:31:13,440

Though they've been submerged for nearly 40 years, one shell spontaneously explodes.

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00:31:13,440 --> 00:31:21,440

In 1997, early morning joggers on Cocoa Beach, Florida come upon an object that is washed ashore during the night.

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00:31:21,440 --> 00:31:30,440

After careful examination, the object is revealed as part of the remains from the tragic explosion of the space shuttle Challenger.

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00:31:30,440 --> 00:31:38,440

Astonishingly, the Challenger incident happened 22 miles away from Cocoa Beach and over a decade earlier.

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00:31:38,440 --> 00:31:47,440

Along the western coast of Scotland, incendiary shells work their way out of an abandoned World War II munitions dump and wash ashore.

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00:31:47,440 --> 00:31:54,440

Although submerged for over 40 years, several shells ignite, injuring an unwary beach walker.

316

00:31:54,440 --> 00:32:03,440

From these examples, it becomes exceedingly clear that a submerged bomb lying on the ocean's floor

is not something to be ignored.

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00:32:03,440 --> 00:32:08,440

For the most part, the ocean bottom around Savannah, Georgia is smooth and sandy.

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00:32:08,440 --> 00:32:17,440

Rudy Anderson, a shrimp boat captain, has been fishing off Savannah all his life, but every once in a while, Rudy hits a snag.

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00:32:17,440 --> 00:32:22,440

It's constantly talk about it. We're kind of sure we know exactly where it's at.

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00:32:22,440 --> 00:32:27,440

And sometimes some boats that drag in there, they'll hang out really hard in there.

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00:32:27,440 --> 00:32:35,440

Could Rudy's big snag be the lost bomb? Some of the coordinates obtained from the accident indicate that possibility.

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00:32:35,440 --> 00:32:40,440

The shallow waters of Wasa Sound rarely exceed 30 feet.

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00:32:40,440 --> 00:32:50,440

Fast-moving 8-foot tidal surges swell on these shores twice a day, wreaking havoc along the coast of the frequent hurricanes for which this area has become infamous.

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00:32:50,440 --> 00:33:01,440

One can only imagine what such storms can do to the ocean floor and how they might affect the location and integrity of a lost nuclear device like the Mark 15 bomb.

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00:33:01,440 --> 00:33:12,440

When contacted, the Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration claim to have no knowledge of the lost bomb in Wasa Sound.

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00:33:13,440 --> 00:33:28,440

Even the Navy's elite explosive ordinance disposal unit, a team specializing in finding and disarming underwater munitions and the very team that surveyed the area for the 1994 Olympic sailing events, claims ignorance.

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00:33:28,440 --> 00:33:34,440

Outside of Washington, D.C., this bomb simply does not exist.

328

00:33:34,440 --> 00:33:44,440

If you look for a lost bomb as the United States Navy and don't find it, what do you do? What do you say to the community? I can't find your bomb?

329

00:33:44,440 --> 00:33:52,440

And if you do find it, do you tell everybody they have to leave their homes while you pull a nuclear bomb out of their backyard? It's a tough dilemma.

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00:33:52,440 --> 00:34:02,440

Lost for over 40 years, the truth about the lost bomb laying at the bottom of Wasa Sound is that no one can speak to either its location or its condition.

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00:34:02,440 --> 00:34:11,440

It takes two more frightening incidents before the government revokes the right for the Air Force to fly practice missions with live nuclear weapons.

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00:34:11,440 --> 00:34:24,440

On January 16, 1966, a B-52 bomber on a routine airborne alert mission collides with the fueling boom of a KC-135 tanker above the coast of Spain.

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00:34:24,440 --> 00:34:37,440

The tanker explodes, instantly killing its four crewmen. Four of seven crew members from the B-52 parachute to safety, leaving four B-28 hydrogen bombs to free fall from the sky.

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00:34:37,440 --> 00:34:49,440

Three land near the small farming community of Palomarra, Spain. The detonation ordinance in two of the bombs explodes, digging huge craters and scattering plutonium everywhere.

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00:34:49,440 --> 00:34:56,440

For the three months that follow, nearly 2,000 U.S. and Spanish personnel work to decontaminate the area.

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00:34:56,440 --> 00:35:05,440

The fourth bomb sinks off the coast of Spain and isn't recovered until three months later when it is located five miles offshore by the one man submersible, Alvin.

337

00:35:05,440 --> 00:35:10,440

The sub is piloted by the son of the famous aviator, Charles Lindbergh.

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00:35:11,440 --> 00:35:20,440

An international furor erupts as Spanish citizens violently protest the U.S. practice of flying over Allied airspace armed with nuclear weapons.

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00:35:20,440 --> 00:35:32,440

Almost 1,400 tons of radioactive soil and plant matter is excavated. This is shipped to the U.S., where it is disposed of, ironically, at the Savannah River Plant.

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00:35:32,440 --> 00:35:41,440

On January 21, 1968, a B-52 bomber on a secret early warning mission crashes into the ice near Tule Air Force Base in Greenland.

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00:35:41,440 --> 00:35:50,440

Six of the seven crew members eject safely, but the bomber smashes into the ice-covered North Star Bay at 560 miles per hour.

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00:35:50,440 --> 00:35:59,440

The crash ignites the plane's 35,000 gallons of jet fuel and detonates the TNT fuses in all four of its atomic weapons.

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00:35:59,440 --> 00:36:07,440

Bomb debris and plane wreckage are consumed in flames, creating a volcanic furnace of molten metal and scattered radioactivity.

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00:36:07,440 --> 00:36:13,440

The heat melts the surrounding ice, which, after the fire, refreezes.

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00:36:13,440 --> 00:36:26,440

Against impossible below-zero weather conditions and arctic darkness, a Herculean cleanup effort results in the collection of 10,500 tons of contaminated snow and debris.

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00:36:26,440 --> 00:36:32,440

This debris is shipped in barrels to, where else, the Savannah River Plant.

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00:36:32,440 --> 00:36:43,440

The Department of Defense, the Department of Energy and the Air Force state in a joint report in the case of the Savannah Bomb, quote, no nuclear capsule was involved.

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00:36:43,440 --> 00:36:48,440

But existing government documents seem to contradict this official story.

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00:36:48,440 --> 00:36:55,440

Congress convened a meeting, a secret meeting, of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy and called the Pentagon on the carpet and said,

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00:36:55,440 --> 00:37:00,440

fellas, tell us the truth. How many bombs have we really lost?

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00:37:00,440 --> 00:37:12,440

This letter, authored by the Secretary of Defense, states in answer to congressional inquiry that of all remaining lost bombs, only two are, quote, complete nuclear weapons.

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00:37:12,440 --> 00:37:15,440

The first incident occurred in 1965.

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00:37:15,440 --> 00:37:27,440

There was an A4 plane on an aircraft carrier that fell off of the loading area with a nuclear weapon, fell off the aircraft carrier and sank off the coast of Japan.

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00:37:27,440 --> 00:37:37,440

The second and only other lost bomb listed as a, quote, complete nuclear weapon is the one sitting in Wasa Sound, just off the coast of Savannah.

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00:37:37,440 --> 00:37:44,440

Yes, the Savannah Bomb is a live, armed, complete nuclear bomb.

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00:37:45,440 --> 00:37:54,440

Tragedy of it all is that nobody knows anything about these bombs whatsoever. Nobody can tell you or me anything more than they're gone.

357

00:37:54,440 --> 00:38:08,440

They can't tell you whether we're one gate away from a nuclear detonation. They can't tell you the Savannah Bomb has had five of those gates open up and an unlucky lightning bolt could set off a

nuclear bomb near Savannah, Georgia.

358

00:38:08,440 --> 00:38:13,440

But it is radioactive material that's sitting out there underneath or on the ocean floor.

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00:38:13,440 --> 00:38:18,440

A lot of stuff is just toxic and not things that you just, you don't want to be aware of.

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00:38:18,440 --> 00:38:33,440

The casings on this weapon are metal. Over time, the water and the salt are going to start working away at the seals and any welds that are in this material.

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00:38:33,440 --> 00:38:40,440

And slowly but surely this material is going to start moving into the environment because we live on a planet that cycles everything.

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00:38:40,440 --> 00:38:51,440

Not even knowing what's in a nuclear bomb, the EPA would never allow somebody to dump a bomb into groundwater or into a river like the Savannah River or a water area like the Savannah Low Country.

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00:38:51,440 --> 00:39:01,440

The bomb in Wasa Sound is likely to contain uranium-238, an element with a half-life of 4.5 billion years.

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00:39:01,440 --> 00:39:09,440

As every school child knows, uranium is radioactive. It can make human beings very, very sick.

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00:39:09,440 --> 00:39:17,440

One alpha particle delivers a dose equivalent to a thousand X-rays. There is no safe dose.

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00:39:17,440 --> 00:39:22,440

The United States Environmental Protection Agency recognizes this in their radiation standards.

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00:39:22,440 --> 00:39:31,440

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the international bodies all say there is no threshold below which radiation is safe.

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00:39:31,440 --> 00:39:38,440

Because in plain language, nuclear radiation will kill you if you get too much of it.

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00:39:39,440 --> 00:39:52,440

In a Pentagon study, 32 major nuclear incidents were recorded between 1950 and 1980, averaging

approximately one per year.

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00:39:52,440 --> 00:39:59,440

Since 1980, the Pentagon has been conspicuously silent about incidents involving nuclear weapons.

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00:39:59,440 --> 00:40:03,440

Considering this record, it is easy to understand why.

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00:40:03,440 --> 00:40:14,440

I think a lot of these incidents, as with a lot of the information that remains classified today, remains classified because of its embarrassment value, which is not a legitimate means for classification.

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00:40:14,440 --> 00:40:24,440

It would be nice for the government to come clean, as it has in other areas of nuclear weapons, nuclear radiation experiments, for example, and say, yeah, we had some mistakes at the time.

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00:40:24,440 --> 00:40:30,440

During the 1950s, the technology for underwater search and rescue was primitive.

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00:40:30,440 --> 00:40:40,440

In recent years, the development of new undersea technologies has resulted in the location and exploration of Titanic in its watery grave three miles beneath the sea.

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00:40:40,440 --> 00:40:51,440

In 1999, astronaut Gus Grissom's Liberty Bell Space Capsule, an object no larger than a telephone booth, is recovered hundreds of miles off the Florida coast.

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00:40:51,440 --> 00:41:02,440

Dave Warford, an expert in undersea search and discovery, who played a key role in both the Titanic and Liberty Bell expeditions, talks about the Savannah bomb.

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00:41:02,440 --> 00:41:15,440

Is it buried in the mud? Has the current pushed it around? There's a lot of involving factors that you have to take into consideration when you set up to do a search like that.

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00:41:15,440 --> 00:41:22,440

I can tell you now that the way technology is going with leaps and bounds, that nothing's impossible these days.

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00:41:22,440 --> 00:41:30,440

In 1999, John F. Kennedy Jr., his wife and sister-in-law tragically crash in a private plane off the coast of Martha's Vineyard.

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00:41:30,440 --> 00:41:36,440

An unprecedented search ensues through the joint effort of the Coast Guard and Navy.

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00:41:36,440 --> 00:41:41,440

Miraculously, the wreckage is found and recovered only several days later.

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00:41:41,440 --> 00:41:47,440

With this kind of technology available, couldn't the same be done to recover the Savannah bomb?

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00:41:47,440 --> 00:41:55,440

Many questions remain about the lost nuclear weapon lying at the bottom of Wausau Sound near Savannah, Georgia.

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00:41:55,440 --> 00:42:00,440

Could the metal housing of the weapon have remained intact after falling thousands of feet from the sky?

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00:42:00,440 --> 00:42:05,440

Is the toxic cocktail of radioactive elements still contained?

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00:42:05,440 --> 00:42:15,440

With the Cold War long over and strategic air command dissolved, perhaps it is time for the U.S. military to pick up the pieces of its broken past.

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00:42:15,440 --> 00:42:24,440

If not for the sake of the environment or the people of Savannah, then to honor the service of brave aviators like Howard Richardson,

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00:42:24,440 --> 00:42:36,440

Robert Leigerström and Clarence Stewart, who heroically, visionally protected America's skies from invasion during the dark and ominous years of the Cold War.

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00:42:36,440 --> 00:42:42,440

These pilots of the Cold War, the SAC pilots and the TAC pilots were nothing short of heroes.

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00:42:42,440 --> 00:42:47,440

In fact, the Cold War is over and we can now talk freely about this stuff and say,

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00:42:47,440 --> 00:42:51,440

what the heck is that doing in my backyard instead of, well, I'm glad they're up there protecting my freedom.

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00:42:51,440 --> 00:43:00,440

I can't understand why it hasn't been recovered, but that's a question that I'm sure a lot of people have.

394

00:43:00,440 --> 00:43:05,440

A nuclear bomb shouldn't be in a river near Savannah, Georgia.

395

00:43:05,440 --> 00:43:12,440

A nuclear bomb shouldn't be in a farm field in North Carolina or off the coast of Puget Sound or near Cape Main, New Jersey.

396

00:43:12,440 --> 00:43:20,440

The United States government, the Department of Defense, the explosive ordinance, the disposal of people ought to go in and get them out.

397

00:43:20,440 --> 00:43:32,440

If we were told that there was an atomic bomb off the coast of the United States and they needed someone to go get it, could we do it? Absolutely.

398

00:43:32,440 --> 00:43:41,440

Twelve atomic bombs. That's all that the United States admitted to losing and that was back in the 60s.

399





00:46:11,740 --> 00:46:14,820

and

412

00:46:14,820 --> 00:46:16,880

you