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TITAN IVA CARRYING NRO SATELLITE EXPLODES IN FLIGHT

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By Kyle Crosby

A Lockheed Martin [LMT] Titan IVA space launch vehicle carrying a classified National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) payload exploded shortly after it was launched yesterday at Cape Canaveral, Fla.

An Air Force statement said the rocket began to self-destruct 40 seconds after it was launched from Space Launch Complex 41.

Air Force safety officials sent self-destruct signals to the Titan IV about two seconds later to break up the rocket and reduce potential damage from debris.

The destroyed Titan IVA rocket was worth about \$400 million and the NRO payload was valued at just under \$1 billion dollars, officials said. The launch was to have been the Air Force's last Titan IVA mission.

Debris from the explosion landed safely in the ocean about one-half a mile offshore, the service added. There were no injuries or damage to launch facilities on private property nearby.

"[The Air Force's] emergency plans all went well; everything went as expected in case of an explosion," said Lt. Col. Don Miles, a spokesman for the Air Force Space Command (SPACECOM) at Peterson AFB, Colo.

Brig. Gen. Randall Starbuck, commander of the 45th Space Wing at nearby Patrick AFB, Fla., said at a press conference that three groups were being created to investigate the explosion.

The first group, an Engineering Analysis Team led by Lockheed Martin, will gather engineering data from the explosion for the other two groups. The second group, the Accident Investigation Board, led by Maj. Gen. Robert Hinson of SPACECOM, will prepare an accident report for public release. The third second, a Safety Investigation Board, led by a colonel from the 30th



Space Wing at Vandenberg AFB, Calif., will produce a confidential report on its findings.

All Titan launches will be postponed until the boards are satisfied that the launch vehicles are safe, according to Evan McCollum, a Lockheed Martin spokesman. Both he and Miles agreed that it is too early to say what effect the explosion will have on future launches.

Before yesterday's mishap, the next Titan IV launch, of a Titan IVB, was scheduled for Dec. 18 at Cape Canaveral.

The Titan IV that exploded yesterday had already been delayed from its original July 25 launch date because of a tear in the covering of the rocket's Centaur upper-stage motor. Another Titan IV carrying a NRO payload was delayed several months last year because of a nitrogen-tetroxide leak. The last explosion of a Titan IV rocket was at Vandenberg AFB, Calif., in August 1993.

Despite these recent problems, officials are confident Titan can successfully carry out future missions.

"We see no reason not to [use Titan IVs] in the future," said Rick Oborn, a spokesman for the [NRO](#). Miles added that it's "too early to say what relation [the Titan IVA explosion] has to other Titans." All future launches will be on the newer Titan IVB.

The Titan IV is the most powerful unmanned launch vehicle in the United States. It is used to launch military payloads. The Titan IVA was first launched June 14, 1989, and the Titan IVB was first launched Feb. 23, 1997. Before yesterday's accident, the Titan had an overall success rate of 95 percent.



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