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Nuclear Bombs Stored at Nellis

Experts believe the site will be used to store old nuclear weapons that are waiting to be dismantled.

By Keith Rogers
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Just as Southern Nevada played a key role in thrusting the U.S. military into the nuclear age, it probably also will play a major role in President Bush's strategy to scrap some nuclear bombs, a weapons expert said Tuesday.

Stan Norris, a senior staff analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council, drew that conclusion in response to confirmation last week by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., that "a significant number" of nuclear weapons are in storage at a highly guarded part of Nellis Air Force Base at the foot of Sunrise Mountain.

The site, dubbed Area II of the base, lies less than 10 miles from downtown Las Vegas and is the same location where earthmovers tunneled into the mountain some 30 years ago to carve miles of places where munitions could be hidden at what was known then as Lake Mead Naval Station.

A spokesman at Nellis, Air Force M. Greg Kreis, declined to comment on the topic of nuclear weapons storage in Area II, saying base commander Maj. Gen. Billy McCoy "won't respond to it."

Likewise, a Pentagon spokesman for the Air Force, Capt. Dave Thurston, said, "It remains a DOD (Department of Defense) policy to neither confirm or deny the location of nuclear weapons."

An Air Force document says Area II at the northeast edge of the main base became part of the Nellis operation in September 1969, and is the home of the 3096th Aviation Depot Squadron. "Before then it had served as a weapons storage area for the United States Navy," the document says.

The site, where at least 225 tactical nuclear bombs and 35 air-launched cruise missiles are believed to have been stored through 1984, is still one of three Air Force central nuclear storage areas in the United States, and a likely clearinghouse for old nuclear bombs when Bush's dismantlement plan takes effect, Norris said from Washington, D.C.

"That is probably going to be one of the main repositories for (nuclear) weapons coming back. There is going to be a backlog at Pantex because you can't dismantle them all at the same time," Norris said, referring to the plant at Amarillo, Texas, that is a final nuclear warhead assembly point.

Bush administration officials have said the president's plan to store or scrap nuclear warheads would affect 3,000 nuclear weapons of the 22,000 in the U.S. arsenal, deployed on submarines, ships, planes and in silos. His proposal calls for maintaining modern tactical nuclear bombs deployed on land-based warplanes.

The plutonium triggers of some hydrogen bombs are expected to be recycled into smaller, more efficient warheads, according to John Immele, weapons director at the national laboratory at Los Alamos, N.M.

Reid, in a telephone interview with the Review-Journal on Friday, confirmed what other government officials in Congress and the Pentagon have declined to confirm for decades: That nuclear bombs awaiting delivery by Air Force planes sit securely in Area II of Nellis Air Force Base.

"We have a significant number of them stored at the old Lake Mead Naval Station," Reid said. "They have lots stored there."

Reid was the only one of Nevada's four congressional delegates who confirmed the existence of a nuclear bomb storage depot at Nellis.

Rep. James Bilbray, D-Nev., who is a member of the House Armed Services Committee with "code word" clearance, one that is higher than "top secret" for strategic defense issues, declined to comment Tuesday on the Nellis nuclear storage depot.

Rep. Barbara Vucanovich, R-Nev., when asked about the Nellis nuclear depot, said, "I didn't know that. At one time when Sen. Reid was in the House, he went out there and had a briefing on those areas. I didn't want to be privy to anything so secret."

Sen. Richard Bryan, D Nev., said while he could not confirm the existence of the storage depot nor has knowledge of it, "There certainly has been speculation over the years that there are nuclear weapons in the area."

"It would not come as a surprise to me at all that the premier fighter center in the world would have nuclear capability, and in close proximity," Bryan said. "Clearly the weapons have to be in a location where air strike people have access to them," he said.

None of the lawmakers raised safety questions about the location of the depot to the Las Vegas Metropolitan area.

Vucanovich said her confidence in nuclear weapons safety has been bolstered by the track record of the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy in handling and storing weapons ever since 1961, when the government began testing them at the Nevada Test Site, 66 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

I have no reason to be concerned," she said.

Norris, who holds a doctorate degree in political science, contributed to the book, "Nuclear Battlefields -- Global Links in the Arms Race," co-authored by Richard W. Fieldhouse and William M. Arkin. Arkin is director of military research for Greenpeace International. The book was published in 1985, by a subsidiary of Harper & Row Publishers Inc. for the Institute of Policy Studies.

The book lists Nellis Air Force Base as one of three Air Force central nuclear storage sites in the United States. The other two are Kirtland Air Force Base, near Albuquerque, N.M., and Barksdale Air Force Base in Bossier City in northwestern Louisiana.

Norris said while the book says there are 86 nuclear tipped air launched cruise missiles stored in Area II at Nellis, he doubts they are still there.

He said he and Arkin verified their assumptions about the stockpile using government facts on security regulations, missions and duties of certain military outfits, such as those that might pertain to the 3096th Aviation Squadron.

Back when we did this calculation (in 1984) we took our best guess of the composition of the arsenal at the time and divvied it up at deployment sites in Europe and at home," Norris said.

He said the type of nuclear bombs presently stored at the Nellis depot are the B61 Mod 3 and the B61 Mod 4. Both are tactical nuclear bombs designed by scientists at the Los Alamos, N.M., laboratory for delivery by F-111 and F-16 fighter jets, and for allied aircraft.

"We provide custody of the warheads and their pilots are trained for nuclear missions," Norris said.

He said the B61 series of warheads has been in production since 1979, and each one can deliver an explosive yield equivalent to between 150 kilotons and 300 kilotons. By comparison, the atomic bomb that leveled Hiroshima, Japan, in

1946 produced an estimated yield of about 15 kilotons to 18 kilotons, which means these modern bombs are 10 to 20 times more powerful.

He said the B61 series was developed to replace older, tactical Air Force nuclear bombs such as the B28, B43, and B67.

"There could be a lot of this old stuff awaiting dismantlement," he said, noting that under the present defense structure, Nellis Air Force Base will be a place where a number of them "in the low hundreds" will be stored until they can be flown or transported to a facility where they can be taken apart.

Photo Captions

Original article includes photo of Area II

Comments

It is amusing to me that the same politicians who show little concern about nuclear weapons on the outskirts of Las Vegas are violently opposed to the storage of nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain or anywhere on the Nevada Test Site, a pre-existing wasteland at least 50 miles away. Nuclear weapons are made to destroy things and kill people. It seems that the likelihood of them blowing up accidentally would be far greater than stored waste that has already been processed and is deliberately designed not to blow up.

How the local politicians can oppose Yucca while supporting Area II defies logic... But then again, there never has been any logic in the nuclear world.

-- Glenn Campbell

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