

# NUCLEAR WEAPONS:

## An accident waiting to happen

We know of nearly 70 military nuclear accidents since 1950 (mainly from the US and UK from which information is more forthcoming). These include several incidents of lost or missing nuclear weapons. Many incidents have involved explosions and/or fires or some other mechanism for spreading fissile material. There were also a number of times when a nuclear war was narrowly averted. There are undoubtedly many more we do not (and may never) know about.

**Jul 27, 1956:** US bomber skids off runway at RAF Lakenheath, crashing into a storage unit containing three atomic bombs. Weapons engulfed in flames before fire fighters were able to extinguish the fire.

**May 22, 1957:** Nuclear bomb accidentally dropped in the New Mexico desert.

**Sep 25, 1959:** Aircraft in trouble drops two large fuel tanks shortly after take-off at Greenham Common, one hits a parked aircraft nearby which has a nuclear bomb on board. Two are killed in resulting fire which takes 16 hours to extinguish. Area around base is radioactively contaminated. The incident remains secret until uncovered by CND in 1996.

**Jan 23, 1961:** Three people are killed when an aircraft carrying nuclear bombs crashes in North Carolina. Three of four arming devices on one bomb trigger, meaning it was only one safety mechanism away from detonation.

**Dec 5, 1965:** A nuclear-armed airplane rolls off the aircraft carrier USS Ticonderoga and sinks in 16,000 feet of water off the coast of Japan.

**Jan 17, 1966:** Two bombers collide while refuelling midair above Palomares, near the Spanish coast. Seven are killed and high explosives are triggered upon hitting the ground, scattering radioactive material. Cleaning up the area costs the US up to \$800,000.

**May 21, 1968:** The US nuclear submarine Scorpion sinks in the Atlantic near the Azores, killing 99 crewmen. The submarine carried two nuclear-armed torpedoes.

**Apr 12, 1970:** The Soviet nuclear submarine K-8 sinks in the Bay of Biscay, killing 53 crew members. It carried two nuclear torpedoes.

**Sep 8, 1977:** Soviet nuclear submarine jettisons a nuclear warhead by mistake in the Pacific.

**Sep 19, 1980:** A dropped spanner breaks a fuel tank in a missile silo in Arkansas. The explosion blows the 740-ton door off, sending a warhead 600ft into the air. One person is killed and 21 are injured.

**Aug 10, 1985:** Soviet nuclear submarine suffers a reactor explosion killing ten people. A radioactive cloud contaminates Vladivostok.

**Sep 27, 1991:** Missile misfires on Soviet submarine carrying nuclear weapons.

**Mar 20, 1993:** Russian nuclear submarine collides with a US nuclear attack submarine in the Barents Sea.

**Aug 29, 2007:** Six nuclear armed cruise missiles are loaded onto a bomber at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota and flown to Barksdale AFB in Louisiana. They remain on the aircraft for 36 hours unprotected by mandatory security precautions and are never reported missing by Minot.

**Feb 4, 2009:** UK and French submarines collide in the Atlantic. Both have nuclear weapons on board.



### Uncovered accidents: 68

There may be many more...

Including

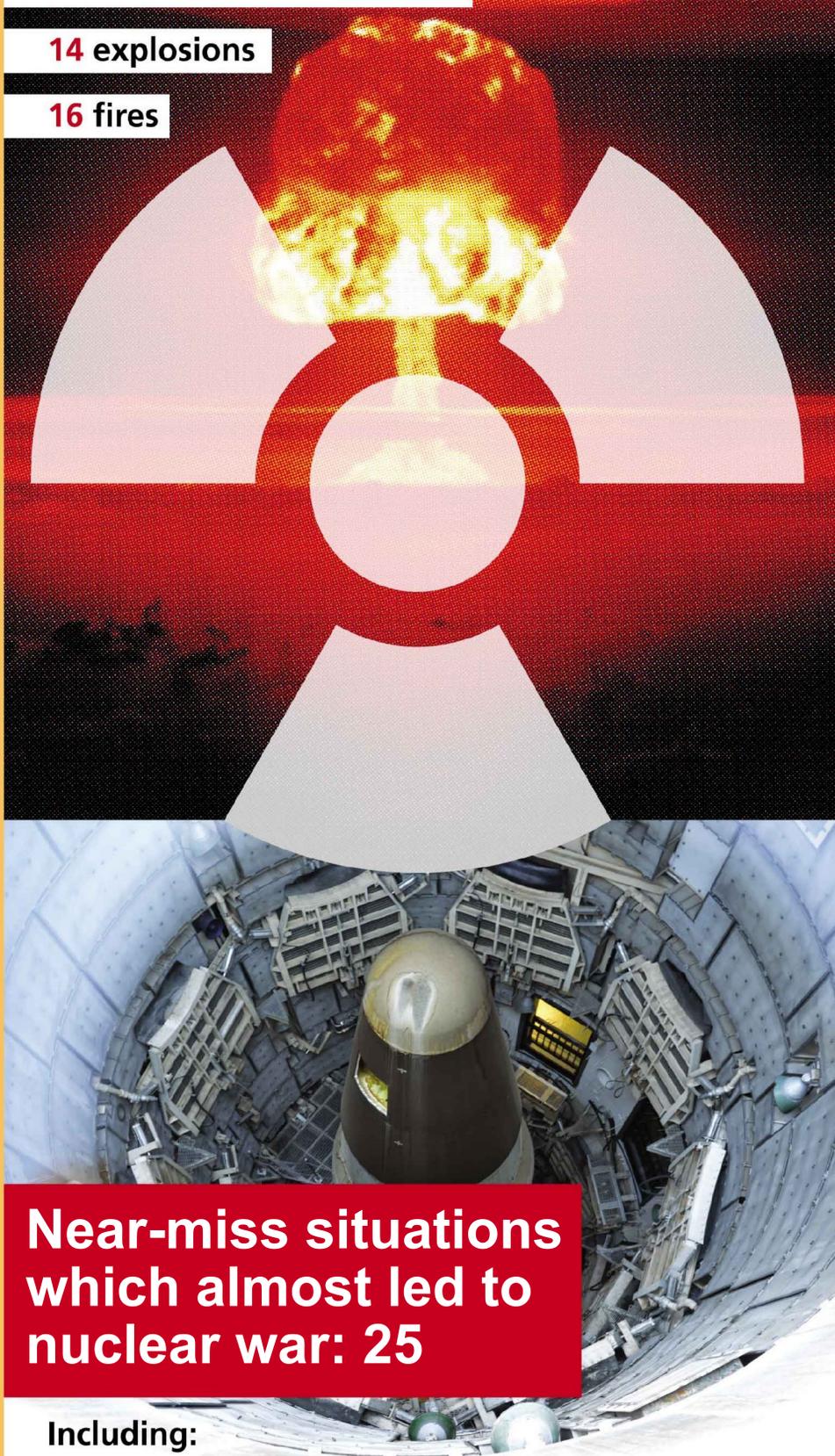
**25 accidents which resulted in fatalities**

**13 nuclear weapons lost**

**11 contamination incidents**

**14 explosions**

**16 fires**



### Near-miss situations which almost led to nuclear war: 25

Including:

- A Soviet nuclear sub was running out of air and needed to surface during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Surrounded by US warships, the captain was **ready to fire a nuclear torpedo** but was prevented from doing so by a colleague, Commander Arkhipov.
- A satellite system malfunction in 1983 which made it look like the **US had attacked the Soviet Union**. Lt Col Petrov, the officer on duty did not initiate a retaliatory attack. He received an international bravery award for averting nuclear war and a film "The man who saved the world" made about the incident.
- A 1995 Norwegian rocket launch which **almost led Russia to authorise a nuclear attack**, in fact the rocket was studying the Northern Lights.
- A 2018 Chatham House study declares **nuclear weapons systems vulnerable to cyber attacks**: "There are a number of vulnerabilities and pathways through which a malicious actor may infiltrate a nuclear weapon system without a state's knowledge."

How long can our luck hold out?