

March Day in 1962

'Flap' at Missile Base Merely a Malfunction

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For a long 90 minutes, the Nike-Hercules battery near Gary, Ind., was tense. The missile readiness control panel glowed red, signaling that the nuclear warhead of one missile was armed for detonation.

This couldn't be true, and yet the awful consequences of an accidental atomic explosion was always in the back of the minds of every member of the battery.

They knew very well that several prescribed actions had to be taken first to arm the missile—and that these had not been taken.

But there was the red light.

Higher Army headquarters was notified immediately and technicians of Battery B, 1st Missile Battalion, 60th Artillery, at Porter, Ind., went to work. After 1½ hours that day in March, 1962, they found the trouble.

According to one report which has just come to light, an officer who had been working on the missile had left his flashlight inside. This account has it that the flashlight burned out, that chemicals in the batteries leaked, the wiring short-circuited, and the missile had thus armed itself.

After checking the report, Army Department official spokesmen said both the flashlight story and the statement that the missile had been armed for atomic explosion were false.

According to the account of one who was there at the time:

"A sergeant making a routine check of a instrument panel which monitors

the state of readiness of the nuclear Nikes noticed to his horror that one missile registered on the panel as armed, that is, ready for firing and detonation. He pushed every panic button he could find and within minutes the base was in the biggest flap of its history—a state of excitement and fear that still makes men who were there feel queasy at the thought of it."

This report said that the missile subsequently was disarmed and the flashlight discovered.

The Army Department, however, said that a check at all levels down to the battery mentioned shows no record of any such incident as described. The Army added:

"At about the time cited test equipment (there) did give false indications that a missile was ready to fire. These false indications were due to a technical malfunction in the test equipment. At no time, however, was the missile actually ready to fire."

No one was found to be at fault for what occurred, and there was no investigation or disciplinary action taken, he said, because the false indication resulted from a technical malfunction in the wiring. "There was no flashlight," the spokesman stated.