

U.S. Fearful of Repercussions

Massive Hunt Under Way to Locate H-Bomb Lost in Crash Over Spain



Paris Match Photo

CRASH SCENE—Part of wrecked jet in farmer's field near Palomares, Spain.

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What promises to be the most intensive and expensive search for man or object ever conducted by the United States is now under way for a missing American hydrogen bomb.

The search—on and just off the southeastern coast of Spain—will continue until the bomb is found or Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, with the concurrence

of the State Department and the approval of the White House, is convinced beyond all doubt that the bomb cannot be recovered by the United States or anyone else.

This is not the first atomic or hydrogen bomb lost by the United States. Somewhere in the soft soil of North Carolina, near Goldsboro, is buried a hydrogen bomb minus

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its explosive trigger. The search for this weapon, one of tens of thousands in America's nuclear arsenal, last date from late January, when a B-52 crashed, until late May, 1961, when the bomb was given up for lost.

Other atomic and hydrogen bombs—the number is secret—have been deliberately jettisoned at sea, to lighten the load of a disabled bomber, when a crash of the bomber was imminent.

Already thousands of men have spent 37 days and nights at a cost of millions of dollars and accompanied by a flotilla of 20 ships ranging from the Nation's newest deep-diving oceanographic submarines to minesweepers looking for the missing H-bomb near the Spanish village of Palomares on the Mediterranean coast.

Already this search — and the few facts that have oozed through a nearly impenetrable official silence — has raised diplomatic, military and psychological fears here, in Spain, and in a number of other places abroad. The silence has been imposed by the Spanish government and honored by the United States government.

• There are dark hints, and they are no more than hints, that other supersecret equipment was lost, equipment that would still have to be found even if the hydrogen bomb itself were recovered. One suggestion is that targeting information was lost, which, if it fell into the wrong hands, could strengthen an enemy's air defense and weaken American offensive capability. Another possibility is a lost radar fuse, which helps to serve to arm a hydrogen bomb and

which, if it fell into the wrong hands, could enable an enemy to perfect countermeasures against the radar.

• There is a deep concern that the missing bomb or even key pieces of the weapon, if it fell into anyone else's hands, could provide in various degrees valuable information for making and setting off atomic bombs.

• There is a measure of anxiety that the Spanish bomb incident might cause far-reaching diplomatic and military repercussions that could deprive the United States of its present freedom to carry the Free World's nuclear defense wherever it is needed. **WANTS TO**

• Though American officials are satisfied that there is no health hazard to the Spanish villagers subjected to radiation as a result of the acci-

dent, there is a psychological scar across the village of Palomares and a nuclear-age curse on its tomato crops. Moreover, officials frankly admit they don't know what to do with the contaminated dirt in the area. As one said: "We sure don't want to inter it as a monument to the accident."

The story of the Spanish bomb incident began on the morning of Jan. 17 as a thirsty B-52 "Stratofortress" from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina aimed toward a rendezvous with a KC-135 tanker sent aloft from an Air Force Base at Moron in Spain.

The B-52, gaining fame over Vietnam where it has been unloading tons of conventional bombs, is the aging "heavyweight" of the Strategic Air

Command. It flies more than 650 miles an hour; can reach an altitude of 50,000 feet; can fly 12,000 miles before refueling. Its primary aim is to carry a nuclear payload to the enemy.

On any given day or night a number of B-52s are on "airborne alert," euphemistically called "training flights," somewhere over the Free World. A "training flight" can become a deadly mission once a B-52 crew receives the proper commands to strike in nuclear anger.

At approximately 10:15 a.m. EST the two Air Force planes collided. There were survivors and there is an accident report, but its details are not known.

One explanation is that the

B-52 overshot its mark—an extended 47-foot refueling boom stretching out from behind the tanker. As the boom was being maneuvered into the proper position, it ripped up the B-52's back like a can opener, taking the tanker's tail off, too.

Among the debris from both planes that plummeted 31,000 feet to the earth near Palomares were four un-armed hydrogen bombs, eight to ten feet long. They apparently look, weigh, and are shaped like World War II "blockbusters" and are indistinguishable as H-bombs to all but the experts.

The difference, however, is that each of the four hydrogen bombs that fell represented a megaton of destruction. This is a punch equal to

a million pounds of TNT or roughly 500 Hiroshima-type atomic bombs.

No one will say whether the four bombs dropped together in their rack or fell one at a time. There are indications that one or all fell with their parachutes, which are attached to the weapons to let a B-52 escape being consumed in its own nuclear fire if it unloads armed weapons on an enemy.

NEXT: The "fallout" on the Palomares peasant.