

In Spain a super-secret search goes on, 'Thunderball' style

SPECIAL REPORT
SPAIN

THE CASE OF THE MISSING H-BOMB

by RICHARD OULAHAN

The skeletal remains of the tail section of an H-bomb-carrying B-52 are studied by members of a U.S. accident team who were rushed to the scene in Spain.

At 10 o'clock on the sparkling morning of Jan. 17, three tiny objects rendezvoused in the clear blue sky 30,000 feet up over the southern coast of Spain. Two of them were Strategic Air Command B-52 bombers from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina. The third was a KC-135 jet tanker, stationed in Spain, sent up to refuel the bombers. In the midst of the first delicate transfusion, while the mother tanker hovered above the first bomber, fire suddenly broke out in the tanker—and it exploded with a boom that reverberated around the world.

The tanker's crew of four was instantly killed. The fire spread through the umbilical fuel line to the bomber and it fell in flames. At least seven red-and-white parachutes billowed out amid the falling debris. One was afire. Others carried the bodies of dead airmen to earth. Four were blown out into the Mediterranean by a gusty northwest wind. The other bomber streaked away to the west.

Miraculously, not one of the thousands who watched the tragedy from below was killed or injured in the rain of debris that fell on the village, the countryside and into the sea. But seven U.S. airmen lost their lives in the collision and the Air Force lost a nuclear bomb and, perhaps, another top-secret device.

U.S. military forces moved in immediately, setting up a huge in-

stallation that sealed off the area from the rest of the world. An intensive search began for the bomb and any traces of radioactivity. A team of radiation experts from the Atomic Energy Commission was rushed to the scene. Navy ships suddenly appeared and formed a perimeter that stretched far out to sea. Ever since, the unidentified operation on land and water has been conducted under the tightest of military secrecy. At first the *Thunderball* aspects of the great search were not discernible. But gradually the search force took on the familiar trappings: squads of frogmen emerged on the beaches, and tiny two- and three-man subs prowled the waters. Now the spirit of James Bond is all over this tiny coastal area of southern Spain.

Before the nuclear age came to Palomares, life went on as passively as it had since the Moorish invaders were expelled 400 years ago. In the nearby hills, people still live in caves, and a group of wild camels (abandoned after the filming of *Lawrence of Arabia*) lope across the semidesert not far away. The town of Palomares itself is a dusty congregation of one-story white-washed houses. The countryside is a mixture of barren sand dunes, where only cactus grows, and dry riverbeds which the peasants have laboriously irrigated into truck gardens and citrus orchards.

Now, however, there is an air of

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Evidence stacks up in the Junk Pile

MISSING BOMB CONTINUED

desolation over the land. The tomatoes are rotting on the vine, or have been scythed down by the weirdly clad American soldiers. Small red flags flutter everywhere, indicating forbidden areas—where radiation has been detected or even suspected. Oranges and lemons in the small orchards are unpicked. Black goats forage in the abandoned bean patches. An occasional clump of scarlet poppies brightens the landscape and proclaims the arrival of spring, but it is a silent spring in Palomares.

The once-deserted Mediterranean coast at Palomares looks like a World War II invasion beachhead. The cruiser *Boston*, flagship of Rear Admiral William S. Guest, commander of the naval search, lies at anchor not far offshore, flanked by a destroyer. Farther out—all the way to the edge of the horizon—are the silhouettes of a dozen other ships, including some of the most sophisticated craft in the U.S. Navy. On the beach, an encampment with neat rows of rectangular green tents houses 700 airmen, soldiers, sailors, civilian technicians and Spanish troops. A motor park, filled with Jeeps, bulldozers and supply trucks, is on the perimeter of the camp.

At one side of the camp is a fenced-off area containing the tents of Air Force Maj. General Delmar Wilson, Commanding General of the 16th Air Force and commander-in-chief of the entire Palomares operation, and his top aides. An extremely talented mo-

bile communications system, which can reach any place in the world in a matter of minutes, has been hooked up in GHQ. The system, perhaps as a gesture to the White House, is officially known as "Talking Bird." Nearby is the tent of Brig. General Arturo Montel Touzet, commander of the Spanish forces on the beachhead.

On the beach, somewhat removed from Camp Wilson, as the airmen have named it, is a grim reminder of the tragic event that brought about this costly and complex land, sea and air expedition. It is called the "Junk Pile" and grows bigger every day, as bits and pieces of the two fallen planes are recovered from the fields or fished from the sea and added to it, neatly identified with tags.

Officially, the military and diplomatic authorities in Spain will not even admit that a bomb is missing. Washington has authorized the U.S. Embassy in Madrid and the 16th Air Force in Torrejon to issue a few terse releases, announcing that the crash occurred, listing the survivors and dead, admitting that U.S. Army and Navy units are present at Palomares, and acknowledging, after much prodding from the press, that the B-52 carried ~~unarmed~~ nuclear weapons. The plane actually carried four ~~unarmed~~ H-bombs. Three of them were recovered almost immediately in the dry bed of the Almanzora River.

The result has been utter frustration and confusion among the international press—and wildly inaccurate reports from Palomares. The London *Express* reported that



Francisco Ponce Navarro describes how a flaming jet engine from one of the planes landed in the dirt road in front of his house on the edge of Palomares.

an explosion on the beachhead had released "deadly alpha rays." An Italian paper printed a photograph of some crumbling mine buildings and announced that they had been ruined by the crash of the planes. The UPI reported Soviet trawlers lurking outside the search zone. As the stories grew more fantastic, the men in charge became more glumly uncommunicative.

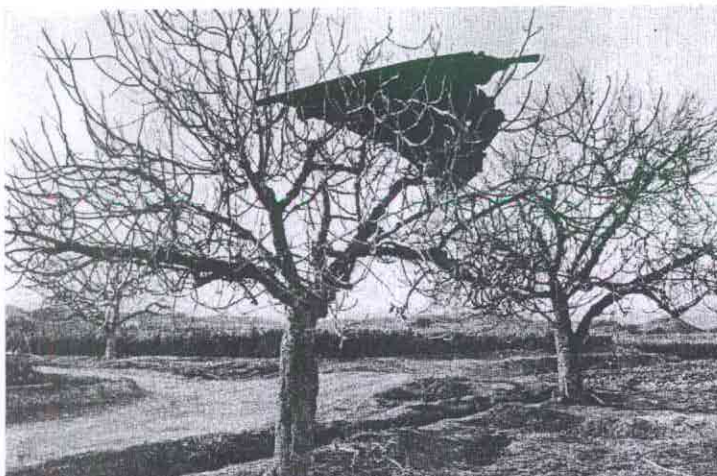
A reporter, seeking the press center last week, blundered into an off-limits area. Before he was chased away he encountered a crew of bizarrely dressed soldiers working over a tomato patch. They carried Geiger counters, scintillation counters and other odd-looking implements, and they wore gleaming white fatigues, light blue surgical caps that fitted snugly over their ears, and blue face masks. Later, when two of the men appeared in the PX wearing their white fatigues, the reporter asked who they were. "Oh, they're members of the postal detachment," an information officer blandly told him. "I don't know why their new uniforms are white."

From time to time helicopters

and spotter planes swoop low over the camp to drop their cargo nets filled with aerial photographs, messages too secret to be transmitted over Talking Bird, and supplies from San Javier, the Spanish air force base 118 miles away. Engineers are repairing and resurfacing all of the primitive roads in the vicinity, and the Navy is building a pier from the beach out of slag from an old lead mine.

The search area is a rough ellipse of 15 square miles, with one-third of it extending into the sea. The naval operations are directed by Admiral Guest. Every morning Navy swimmers and snorkelers probe the bottom of the sea from a depth of a few inches to 10 or 20 feet. Beyond that, black-suited frogmen continue the search to depths of 50 feet. Farther out, "hard hat" divers, based with the frogmen on a large, self-propelled craft known as the "Deep Jeep," explore and re-explore the bottom at even greater depths. Jon Lindbergh and his team of civilian underwater experts are based on the Deep Jeep. At the outer edge of the search area, where the Mediterranean drops steeply to greater depths than individual divers can go to, the Sixth Fleet has brought in some of the Navy's most ultrasophisticated detection devices, including high-resolution sonar, television, radar, shadowgraphs and a bathysphere. An oceanographic vessel is charting the Mediterranean's floor. Two tiny, complex

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Snagged like a fallen kite in the thick branches, a piece from one of the U.S. Air Force planes rests in an olive tree in the arid countryside of southern Spain.

In Zone Zero a crop of tomatoes withers on the vine

MISSING BOMB CONTINUED

submarines, the two-man *Alvin* and the 51-foot research craft *Aluminaut*, are at work trying to recover objects which have been found on the bottom of the sea, but which divers cannot reach or raise.

These amphibious forces have recovered more than 100 objects from the sea, according to U.S. Ambassador Angier Biddle Duke. They include galley equipment, a large rubber ball, a file case, an entire wing of the bomber, and old Spanish galleon cannon balls. Objects located at the outermost limits of the search zone have been marked by rings of red cork buoys to await salvage by *Alvin* or *Aluminaut*. When local fishing vessels fouled the lines of the buoy markers, Admiral Guest ordered them out of the area—and instantly touched off gossip that the bomb was emitting radiation in the sea. Guest has been evaluating water samples constantly, at eight-hour intervals, and has found no trace of nuclear contamination. Nevertheless the sale of shrimp from nearby waters has dropped 50%.

A change in the search patterns last week touched off speculation that the missing bomb may have landed on the ground instead of in the sea. Many of the ships were

moved a few miles west of the original search area while on shore the hunt was intensified along the Almanzora River bed.

In the town, the worried farmers gather in clusters in the local bar and at the crossroads, by the sign that reads *Equipo de Busca de Avion* (Airplane Search Team).

Of 400 acres of farmland immediately surrounding Palomares, designated as "Zone Zero" by the military, just seven acres have been returned to their owners as safe. About 32 more acres are ready to be returned, certified as not radioactive but still subject to the approval of Spanish nuclear energy experts. Around Zone Zero is a perimeter of 400 additional acres which are in a sort of half-condemned state. The farmers there are not allowed to harvest and sell their tomatoes, which have grown too ripe to be sold at distant markets. Unless the crops can be marketed in a hurry, they will be lost. The 800 acres of produce in Zone Zero and its perimeter have a market value of about \$2 million, which the U.S. will have to pay if all the crops are lost.

The citizens of Palomares do not fully understand why the soldiers are still there, and they can only suspect the black dangers that may lurk around them. They are concerned for their families. Many children have been evacuated from the community by their parents, and eight families have moved out altogether. The little groups at the bar talk incessantly about the events of Jan. 17. "Everyone was in the streets looking up," says Mayor José Manuel Gonzalez Fer-

nandez. "The fuselage of the bomber fell in the street just 70 meters from the schoolhouse, where 44 boys and two teachers were at their classes. One *casa* was hit by a piece of a bomb. The young married woman inside was covered with dust but was not hurt. It is bad for this place. The fishermen of Villa Rico [three miles away] no longer go to fish."

When the accident occurred, thousands of Spaniards from a dozen neighboring towns rushed to the scene with every kind of vehicle they could muster, from mule cart to ambulance. One member of the bomber crew was ejected while still strapped into his seat. He managed to unfurl his parachute by hand and landed safely in a field where he was found still in his seat but upside down. The three other survivors—all from the bomber—were lucky that the fishing fleet from *Aguilas* was in the area when they splashed down. When the fishermen heard the explosion and saw the parachutes and debris falling into the sea, they hauled in their nets and made for the distant parachutes.

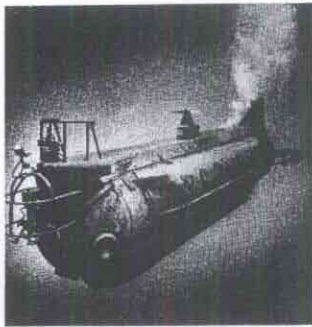
The fishermen saw four parachutes over the water—three with men dangling from the shrouds, and one silvery chute carrying a cylindrical object about four feet long. By the time the fishermen reached the airmen, the fourth parachute and its mysterious cargo had disappeared beneath the waves. It is most unlikely that the object was the missing bomb, inasmuch as the three recovered bombs crashed with the B-52 and were not ejected.

On the day of the tragedy, the Spanish and American authorities set up a special court, headed by a judge advocate from the Spanish air force, to indemnify the farmers and fishermen. So far, 70 damage

claims have been settled. A week after the accident, Generals Wilson and Montel called a meeting of the heads of the hamlet's 243 families—the women of Palomares were furious because they were not invited—to explain the reasons for sealing off certain areas and to thank them for their help, both to the survivors and in the recovery of the wreckage and the three bombs. But all efforts to pay the villagers for their aid have been proudly refused.

The reaction of Spain to the accident and bomb scare has been calmer than that of any other European country. "The foreign broadcasts from Moscow and Prague had a disturbing initial effect on the Palomares area," says Ambassador Duke. "They were sensational in nature and they caused some anti-American rioting in the villages. But as the days went by, and the stories became wilder and wilder, the people realized they were untrue, and they turned back to the local authorities, Spanish and American. The Spanish government's reaction has been one of sympathy, concern and cooperation." However, the government did ban future flights by armed U.S. planes over Spanish territory.

It will take at least another month of searching, cleaning up and decontamination before the airmen at Camp Wilson fold their tents. "And it may be years before we have finished with the people of Palomares," says Ambassador Duke. "The main objective here," the Ambassador adds, "is to leave Spain as we found it." That mission can hardly be accomplished. The new hard-surface roads, the miles of wire strung along the roadsides, the bulldozed earth and the exposure of the people to these strangers from another country and another century all have brought the realities of the nuclear age to dusty Palomares.



In the widening search for the bomb, the deep-diving research sub *Aluminaut* (shown above in test run) has been combing the ocean floor. At right, frogmen, operating from a landing craft, continue hunt near shore. U.S. Navy ships lie in background.

