

Who Pushes the Button?

by Phil Stanford

WASHINGTON, D.C.

On July 9, 1973, Maj. Harold L. Hering, U.S. Air Force, asked a question. At the time he was a student at a special school at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California where officers learn how to launch this country's huge nuclear missiles from their underground silos. According to Major Hering, it seemed like a logical question. So he raised his hand and asked.

What he wanted to know was this: If he got an order to fire the missiles, how could he be sure it was a lawful order? How, for example, could he be sure it wasn't a fake sent by someone other than the President? Or could he be sure the President himself hadn't gone crazy?

Major Hering never got an answer.

Instead, the Air Force dropped him from the course, stopped his promotion to Lieutenant Colonel and began proceedings to kick him out of the service.

Last November, Major Hering, a 21-year veteran who received the Distinguished Flying Cross in Vietnam, was given an administrative discharge from the Air Force for "failure to demonstrate acceptable qualities of leadership." He had, the Air Force said, a "defective mental attitude toward his duties."

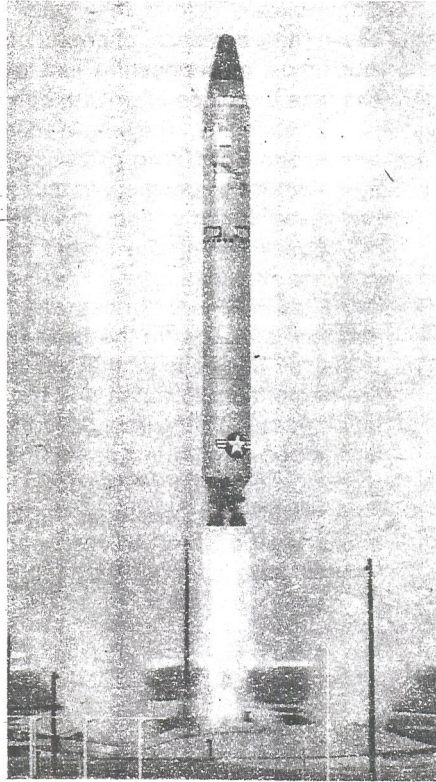
Today Hering lives in the small town of Mt. Carmel, Ill. He still hasn't found a job, and sometimes, considering what has happened to his career and his family, he wonders whether he should have kept his question to himself. He has exhausted all his appeals to the Air Force and his case is closed.

A taboo subject

As Major Hering discovered, there is probably no subject more taboo than how this country handles its nuclear weapons. The military refuses to discuss the subject with anyone who does not have the highest security clearance and, to use the military expression, the "need to know." The Air Force, for example, refused to answer Major Hering's question because they said he did not have the "need to know." (Major Hering contended that, as an officer who took seriously his pledge to protect the country, he had to know whether an order to launch the missiles was lawful.)

It is, however, possible to piece together enough information from unclassified sources to get at least some idea of how the system works in the control centers of ICBM's, nuclear missile submarines and nuclear bombers.

Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles



U.S. Titan missile launch: Whether U.S. error could set off a world war worries many Congressmen and Senators.

(ICBM's) are launched electronically from underground control centers. There are two officers in a control center. To fire their missiles, each officer must insert a key into the control panel in front of his desk and turn it. After they have turned their keys, another two-man team in another launch control center several miles away on the missile base must follow the same procedure.

Each of the four officers must verify the launch order. An order to launch the missiles is transmitted in code. There is a different code every hour. The message received must match the one in the codebook on the operator's desk before each officer takes his key from a red metal box on the wall and inserts it into his control panel.

On a nuclear missile submarine, a firing also requires several people. After the launch order has been verified, two officers must get a key from a double safe—one safe inside another—and deliver it to the captain. The key fits into a control box in front of the captain's chair on the bridge, but the captain can't open the safe to get it. Only the two officers assigned that special duty have the combinations, and each has only one combination.

To launch the submarine's missiles it takes four officers in different parts of

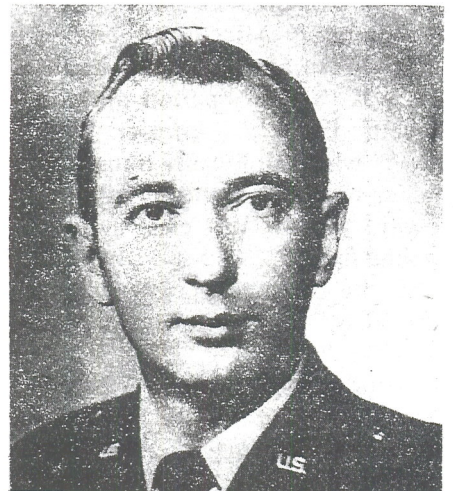
the submarine to turn keys or throw switches. The navigation officer has a switch, launch control has a key, the captain has a key and, finally, the missile officer pulls a trigger. If one of these officers fails—or refuses—to do his part, the missile cannot be fired. There are no controls outside the submarine.

Controls on nuclear bombers are somewhat less rigid. During a nuclear alert—such as the one during the last Mideast war—long-range bombers with nuclear arms fly to a predetermined spot, usually near the Arctic Circle, then circle in holding patterns awaiting further orders. A "go code," if it ever arrives, must be authenticated by three officers in a B-52 (only two in the smaller FB-111). The officers then unlock a leather satchel, take out their orders, and depart for their target. There are no external controls on bombers, either.

Major's question

These procedures are designed to keep one man—in an ICBM control center, a submarine, or a bomber—from starting World War III on his own. But, as Major Hering wanted to know, what are the checks and counterchecks at the end where the orders are given?

Not long ago, in response to a request from the House International Relations Committee, the Library of Congress asked the Department of Defense about procedures for ordering the use of nuclear weapons. The answer they got was short: "Only the President," said the Pentagon, "can authorize the use of our nuclear weapons, and there are positive controls to preclude the use of such weapons without Presidential authority."



Major Hering: He asked how he could be sure an order to fire a missile was lawful, and the Air Force ousted him.

Other inquiries have been no more successful. According to officials who have been let in on the secret procedures that govern the use of nuclear weapons, the President could not order a nuclear attack without "involving" the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It is not clear, however, how any of these officials might prevent an unwarranted launch. The President is, after all, the Commander-in-Chief, and they are subordinates. It is also unclear what safeguards exist to keep a high-ranking official other than the President from getting the "go code" and sending it on his own. The President is not the only official who has access to the codes. If the President were the only one and he were killed in a nuclear attack, the United States would be unable to retaliate.

No answers

Although there is perhaps no subject of greater importance than how a decision to use nuclear weapons might be made, there is also no subject about which less is known. There are no answers, only questions.

Recently Sen. Alan Cranston (D., Cal.) got worried about "who pushes the button." His concern, he says, stems in part from a conversation during the summer of 1974 among several members of the House of Representatives and then-President Richard Nixon. At that time impeachment was beginning to close in on Nixon, and he had invited the Congressmen to the White House to lobby for their support.

As he spoke, Nixon got very emotional. His work for peace, he said, had been far more important than any "little burglary" at Watergate. And then, perhaps to emphasize the awesomeness of the power he had administered so wisely and so well, Nixon said a very strange thing. "Why," he said, "I can go into my office and pick up the telephone, and in 25 minutes 70 million people will be dead."

It was shortly afterward that Cranston decided to ask the Pentagon for a briefing on the controls over the launching of nuclear weapons. What he got, Cranston says, left him "somewhat reassured," but it also left him with "some serious questions."

President Ford's threat

The questions, he says, became nagging doubts not long ago, when President Ford threatened to use nuclear weapons in response to an attack against South Korean and U.S. forces in Korea.

Cranston and others in Congress, including Reps. Jonathan Bingham, Richard Ottinger (both D., N.Y.) and Les Aspin (D., Wis.), are currently proposing legislation that would limit the President's freedom to start a nuclear war without consulting Congress.

Hering's case may be closed, but his question isn't.

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