

# Nuclear blast from the past?

**London.** A recently declassified US military telegram suggests that a fire that occurred in the late 1950s at a nuclear weapons store in the United Kingdom came within a whisker of detonating a nuclear bomb.

The 1956 telegram — from a US military official stationed in the United Kingdom to General Curtis LeMay, commander of US Strategic Air Command — tells how a B47 bomber ploughed into a nuclear weapons store at a Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Lakenheath, Suffolk, setting fire to three 'Mark-six' bombs, similar to that dropped on Nagasaki in 1945. The telegram says that a bomb disposal officer described it as "a miracle" that none of the bombs exploded.

Brief details of the accident were released by the Pentagon in the early 1980s. But this account, and subsequent statements by the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) have claimed that the bombs did not contain any nuclear capsules. This latest evidence suggests otherwise, says Robert S. Norris, a senior analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington. Norris discovered the telegram while browsing through recently declassified material at the US Library of Congress.

Asked to comment on the telegram to LeMay, an MoD spokeswoman says "it is

not up to the MoD to comment on a US document".

Norris believes that officials in Washington would have been similarly notified of two fires — one involving a B47 bomber loaded with a nuclear bomb — that are alleged to have taken place at a weapons facility at Greenham Common in Berkshire in 1957 and 1958. "I don't have that cable, but am certain that one exists."

The latest revelations follow the leaking last week of correspondence from a scientist from the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston in Berkshire, investigating high levels of enriched uranium beyond the perimeter of Greenham Common in the late 1950s. The scientist suggested that fires could have been the cause. Another incident recorded in a declassified RAF operations record book, reports the accidental jettisoning of a 20–30 kilotonne nuclear weapon from an aircraft onto the hard standing of RAF Wittering in Lincolnshire in May 1959. The accident resulted in "severe damage" to the weapon.

The bomb is understood to have been accidentally dropped between 50 and 100 feet from the ground as the bomber was landing. Informed UK sources say that, while no radioactivity was released, the

bomb's casing was "severely dented". The casing would have been fractured had the bomb been jettisoned from an altitude higher than 1,000 feet.

Last week, the MoD did not rule out accidents involving 'dummy' bombs. But

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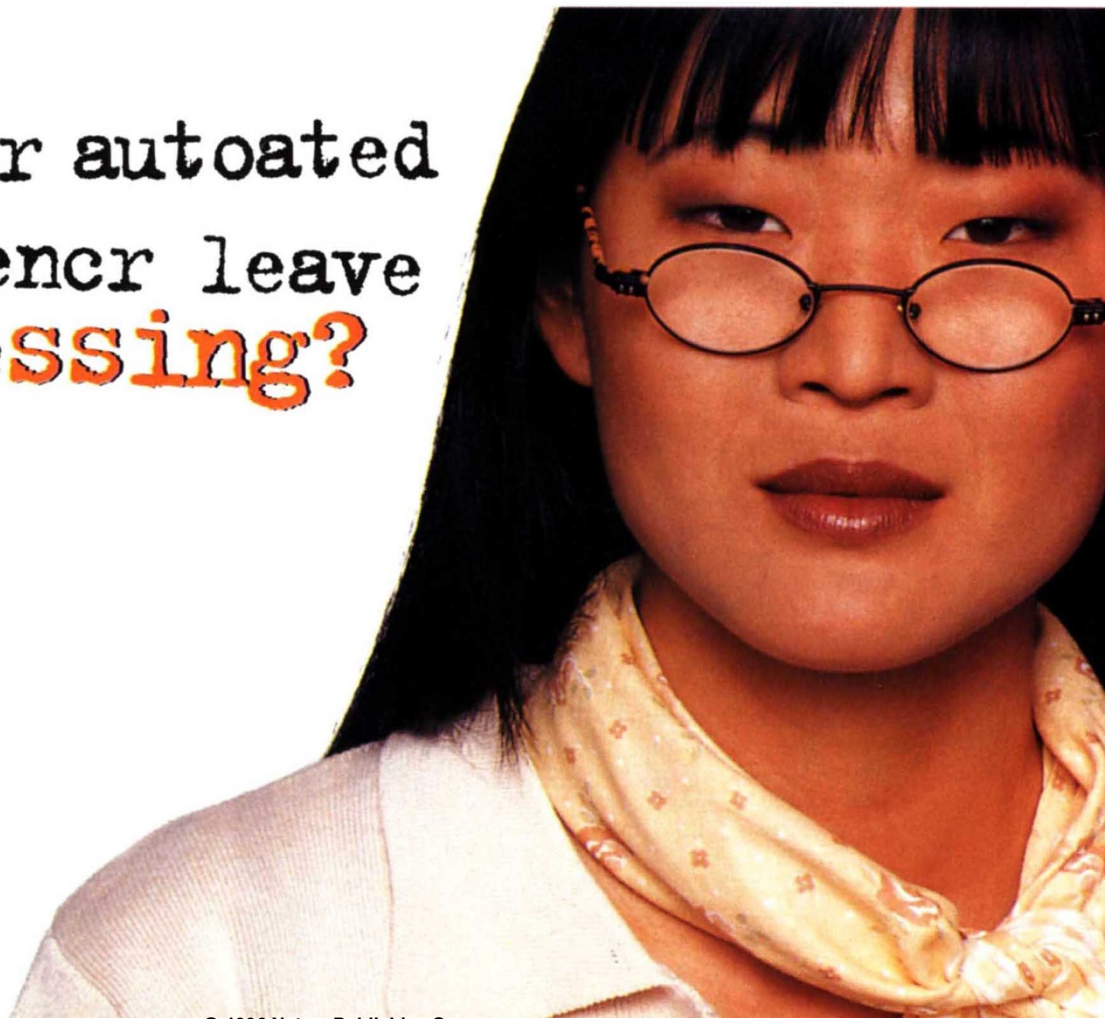
**Red alert: a nuclear bomber at Wittering.**

sources confirm that the bomb in question was an actual nuclear weapon, a fact borne out by the record book entry, which says the aircraft was returning from 'Exercise Mayflight'. This, says Norris, refers to a drill in which loaded nuclear bombers practised getting off the ground within 15 minutes and heading for a designated airfield in response to a possible Soviet missile attack.

The ministry, while acknowledging that accidents have taken place, continues to insist that none involved the release of radioactivity or posed a danger to the public.

But Rebecca Johnson, of the London-

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based publication *Disarmament Intelligence Review*, believes there has to be some explanation for high levels of enriched uranium around Greenham Common in the 1950s. An accident or fire appears the most likely cause as nuclear weapons were deployed but not manufactured at Greenham Common, she says.

Both Johnson and Norris say the British government should be less secretive about nuclear accidents, in line with the US decision to do so in the early 1980s. "Local residents and the emergency services need to be fully briefed," says Johnson. But such a move is unlikely to be supported within the MoD on national security grounds.

Sir Hermann Bondi, chief scientific adviser to the MoD between 1971 and 1977 suggests that the 'public interest' is not always served best by total transparency. "It is not in the public interest that many people should know the location of a [nuclear weapon] store, or what is in it."

But Johnson says 'politics' rather than national security is the reason why accidents at Britain's nuclear installations remain a secret. The government, she says, was determined to push ahead with deploying nuclear weapons in Britain. But it was under pressure from the newly formed Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Any adverse publicity from nuclear accidents would have made the CND's case much stronger, she says.

**Ehsan Masood**

## Panel proposes disarmament guide

**Sydney.** A report from a high-level international panel of scientists, politicians and diplomats last week not only concluded that the time has come to eliminate nuclear weapons, but proposed a detailed scheme to achieve this.

The 17 members of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons including Robert McNamara, a former US defence secretary, Michel Rocard, a former French Socialist prime minister, and Joseph Rotblat, president of Pugwash and the 1995 winner of the Nobel peace prize. The leading academic on the panel is Robert O'Neill, an Australian national and now Oxford professor of the history of war. The panel's findings will be presented to the general assembly of the United Nations next month.

The panel calls for "immediate and determined efforts [to] rid the world of nuclear weapons and the threat they pose to it", while warning of "the increasing odds of a calamity" despite the end of the Cold War. It urges the five nuclear weapons states — the United States, Russia, France, China and the United Kingdom — to "commit themselves unequivocally to the elimination of nuclear weapons and to agree to start work immediately on the practical steps and negotiations required for its achievement".

O'Neill describes the panel's recommendations as "the fullest and most radical yet". They include six steps towards disarmament: taking nuclear forces off alert, removing warheads, ending deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons, banning nuclear tests, further reducing US and Russian nuclear arsenals, and agreement on a "no first use" policy. The group deliberately refrained from setting a timetable for these steps.

The commission says its proposals are realistic, and its report includes 300 pages of technical analysis — of the thorny issue of verification in particular — to support this claim. Whether the report's recommendations will have any practical effect will depend much on mobilising public opinion in the United States after November's presidential election, according to O'Neill.

"The reaction of the US State Department has been good and sympathetic," he says. "They could have chucked it in the bin."

**Peter Pockley**

### Correction

Joseph A. Burns of Cornell University was chairman of the Committee on Planetary and Lunar Exploration (COMPLEX) when its report on Mars missions was being written, and not Ron Greeley, who is the current chairman (see *Nature* **382**, 481; 1996).

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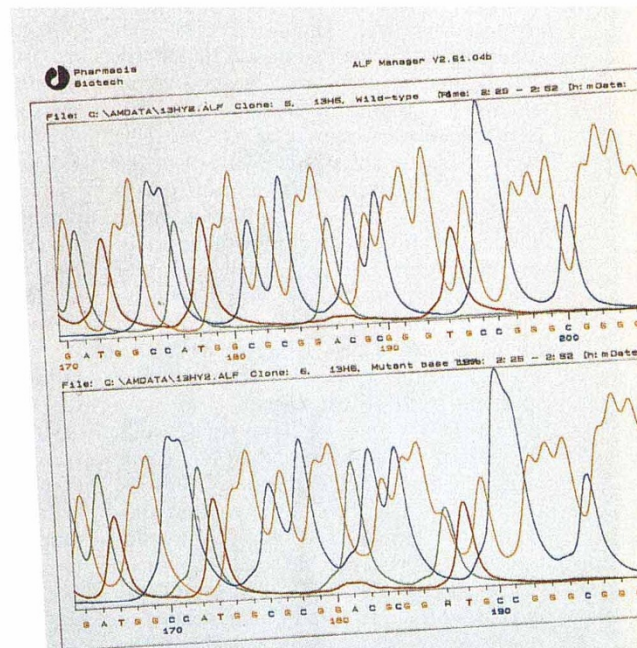
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The p53 gene from 316 breast cancer patients was sequenced using ALF automated sequencing technology. (Bergh J., Norberg, T., Sjögren, S., Lindgren A., Holmberg, L. "Complete Sequencing of the p53 Gene..." *Nature Medicine* 1995; 10:1029-1034.)

