

Lost H-Bomb

Lead: In January 1966, at the height of the Cold War, an armed U.S. Air Force B-52 crashed during a routine refueling over the Mediterranean coast of Spain. In the process, it lost a hydrogen bomb.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: The giant B-52 was part of the Strategic Air Command's regular flights to the edge of Soviet air space. Fully loaded, it held four H-bombs, each 100 times more powerful than the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. To make such a long trip from the continental United States required refueling, and as it approached the KC-135 jet tanker on January 17, 1966, the bomber accidentally rammed the refueling boom, destroying both planes. Aircraft parts and radioactive debris rained down on the Spanish countryside. Three bombs were recovered, but the United States had to endure the embarrassment that a fourth went missing. It had lost a nuclear bomb somewhere over Spain.

At the Sandia National Laboratory in Albuquerque, New Mexico engineers began to calculate weather patterns and bomb characteristics to determine clues where the bomb might have landed. It had been equipped with multiple parachutes so as to

guide its descent to the proper altitude for appropriate explosive effect, but because it had been ripped from its rack by the destruction of the bomber they had no idea which if any of the chutes had deployed.

The mystery began to unravel with the eyewitness testimony of a Spanish fisherman, Francisco Simo Orts, who said he saw what appeared to be a parachute carrying half a man with his insides trailing out fall into the ocean just off the coast. This was important information and using an experimental submersible named *Alvin* they found the bomb and after 81 days hauled it to the surface. The accident brought a severe curtailment to long-range SAC's bombing missions. They ended for good in 1992, though no others had such disastrous results.

From Richmond Virginia, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Moran, Barbara, "The Day They Lost the H-bomb-and How They Got It Back," *American Heritage of Invention and Technology* 20 (2, Fall 2004): 28-39.

Moran, Barbara. *The Day We Lost The H-Bomb*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2009.

Stein, Jonathan H. *From H-bomb to Star Wars: The Politics of Strategic Decision Making*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1984.

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