

Air Force: Human error damaged nuclear-armed missile

WASHINGTON (AP) — Errors by three airmen troubleshooting a nuclear missile in its launch silo in 2014 triggered a “mishap” that damaged the missile, prompting the Air Force to strip the airmen of their nuclear certification and quietly launch an accident investigation, officials said Friday.

In a statement released to The Associated Press, the Air Force declined to provide key additional details or a copy of the report produced last November by the Accident Investigation Board, saying the information was classified and too sensitive to be made public.

Under the Air Force’s own regulations, Accident Investigation Board reports are supposed to be made public. The Air Force did release a brief summary to the AP after it repeatedly sought answers for more than a year. The summary said the full report was classified on Nov. 9, 2015, by Gen. Robin Rand, who took over as commander of Air Force Global Strike Command in July 2015.

The Air Force said the accident caused no injuries and posed no risk to public safety. It said top Pentagon officials were briefed on the results of the investigation in December, as were members of Congress.

The damaged missile was removed from its underground silo, which is designated Juliet-07 and situated among wheat fields and wind turbines about nine miles west of Peetz, Colorado. The silo, one of 10 in a cluster, or flight, that straddles the Colorado-Nebraska border, is controlled by launch officers of the 320th Missile Squadron and administered by the 90th Missile Wing at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming.

The accident follows a period of turmoil inside the nuclear missile corps that the AP revealed in a series of articles and amid an emerging national debate about the costs and benefits of investing hundreds of billions of dollars to modernize the entire strategic nuclear force at a time when war craft is changing.

The Minuteman 3 is the only land-based intercontinental ballistic missile in the nuclear force. First deployed in 1970, it



In this July 28 image provided by the U.S. Air Force, Gen. Robin Rand speaks after taking command of Air Force Global Strike Command during a ceremony at Barksdale Air Force Base, La.

long ago exceeded its planned service life, and the Air Force is developing plans for a replacement.

The Air Force’s brief summary of the Juliet-07 mishap said the Minuteman 3 missile “became non-operational” during a diagnostic test on the evening of May 16, 2014. The next morning a “mishap crew” chief, who was not identified, “did not correctly adhere to technical guidance” during troubleshooting efforts, “subsequently damaging the missile.” No further details about the damage or errors were revealed.

The investigation report summary said the actual cause of the accident, established by “clear and convincing evidence,” is classified. It said there were four contributing factors to the accident, of which it identified two. One was the mishap chief’s failure to follow technical guidance. The other was that the mishap chief “lacked the necessary proficiency level” to anticipate the consequences of his actions during the troubleshooting.

In seeming contradiction of that second point, the Air Force said in its separate statement

to the AP that the mishap team chief was properly trained for the task he was performing. It said he and two other airmen on his team were immediately stripped of their certification to work with nuclear weapons. They remained decertified for “over a year,” until they were retrained and returned to nuclear duty.

Lt. Col. John Sheets, spokesman for Air Force Global Strike Command, said it is possible that some or all of the three could still face disciplinary action.

To prevent a recurrence of their mistake and the accident it caused, the Air Force said it has “strengthened” technical guidance, modified training curriculum and shared information about the conditions that led to the mishap with other units that operate Minuteman 3 missiles.

Lt. Gen. Jack Weinstein was commander of the ICBM force at the time of the incident. The AP requested an interview with him but the Air Force declined to make him available. Weinstein is now the top staff officer on nuclear matters at Air Force headquarters in the Pentagon.

When the AP inquired about

the accident in December 2014, Sheets said no details could be released until after the accident investigation board had completed its work and presented its findings to the commander of Global Strike Command. He assured the AP that the investigation report would be made public, although when the AP filed a request for it in March 2015 under the Freedom of Information Act, the Air Force denied the request, saying the information was “exempt from mandatory disclosure” and would be withheld from release because it consisted of “advice, opinions, evaluations or recommendations.”

Sheets later said the report was not yet complete but would be made public as required under Air Force regulations. He subsequently amended that, saying senior officials had decided the information was too sensitive to release.

The Air Force’s own legal office says the purpose of an accident investigation is to provide a publicly releasable report of the facts and the circumstances of the accident. An Air Force order dated April 14, 2015, is explicit about this.

Key findings in Associated Press missile corps probe

(AP) — Over the past two and a half years, The Associated Press has documented evidence of security problems, low morale and other troubles in the nation’s nuclear missile corps.

- In April 2013, 19 launch officers in the 91st Missile Wing at Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, were taken off duty and given weeks of remedial training after being found unfit to perform. The wing’s deputy commander of operations complained of “rot” in the force. The officer in charge of crew training and proficiency was fired.

- The 341st Missile Wing at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Montana, failed a safety-and-security inspection. Nine days later, the officer in charge of security forces was relieved of duty. The unit passed a do-over in October.

- An internal Air Force review of the Malmstrom inspection, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, revealed that the inspection failed because security forces did not respond adequately to a simulated hostile takeover of a silo housing a nuclear missile. The Air Force implemented numerous corrective measures, mainly designed to increase and improve security forces training.

- In October 2013 the Air Force removed Maj. Gen. Michael Carey from command of the 20th Air Force, which is responsible for the entire Minuteman 3 missile force, for embarrassing, drunken behavior in Russia.

- In January 2014 dozens of missile launch officers were implicated in a cheating scandal at Malmstrom and were stripped of their certification in what the Air Force called the largest such breach of integrity in the nuclear force. The cheating involved the monthly test on their knowledge of how to operate the missiles. That scandal was revealed as part of a drug-use investigation that involved three ICBM launch officers.

- In March the Air Force fired nine midlevel nuclear commanders and supervisors, allowed a senior commander to resign and said it would discipline dozens of junior officers in response to the exam-cheating scandal at Malmstrom.

- On Nov. 3, the Air Force fired a missile squadron commander at Minot and reassigned the vice commander of the 90th Missile Wing at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming to a non-command staff job.

Also, a colonel in charge of all three missile squadrons at Minot was given administrative punishment but not removed from command.

- On Nov. 14, Defense Secretary Hagel ordered top-to-bottom changes in how the U.S. nuclear force is operated and managed. The changes came after a series of stories from the AP that revealed problems in the

East Coast storm will be deadly

WASHINGTON (AP) — A storm that arrived postcard-pretty in the nation’s capital Friday was morphing into a painful, even paralyzing blizzard with gale-force winds pushing heavy snow and coastal flooding. One in seven Americans could get at least half a foot of snow by Sunday, and Washington could see snowdrifts more than 4 feet high.

The first flakes were lovely, but forecasters warned that much, much more was on its way.

Not that anyone will see the worst of it: Much heavier snow and wind gusting to 50 mph should create blinding whiteout conditions once the storm joins up with a low pressure system off the coast, said Bruce Sullivan, a forecaster at the National Weather Service’s Weather Prediction Center in College Park, Maryland.

Two feet or more of snowfall is forecast for Washington and Baltimore, and nearly as much for Philadelphia. New York City’s expected total was upped Friday to a foot or more. But Sullivan said “the winds are going to be the real problem; that’s when we’ll see possible power outages.”

The result could create snowdrifts 4 to 5 feet high, so even measuring it for records could be difficult, he said.

By evening, wet, heavy snow was falling in the capital, making downed power lines more likely, and yet many people remained on the roads, Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser said. “Find a safe place and stay there,” she beseeched.

Anyone trying to travel in this mess risks getting stuck for hours, marooned in odd places, or killed, authorities warned. At least seven people died in storm-related crashes before the worst of the storm, including Stacy Sherrill, whose car plummeted off an icy road

in Tennessee. Her husband survived after climbing for hours up a 300-foot embankment.

“They’re slipping and sliding all over the place,” said Kentucky State Police Trooper Lloyd Cochran — as soon as one wreck was cleared, other cars slammed into each other, causing gridlock for hours on interstate highways.

Conditions quickly became treacherous all along the path of the storm. Arkansas and Tennessee got 8 inches; Kentucky got more than a foot, and states across the Deep South grappled with icy, snow-covered roads and power outages. Two tornadoes arrived along with the snow in Mississippi.

The storm could easily cause more than \$1 billion in damage, weather service director Louis Uccellini said.

U.S. student held in North Korea, little information released

CINCINNATI (AP) — Officials in North Korea and the U.S. released little information Friday about a university student from Ohio who was detained for what the authoritarian nation called a “hostile act.”

Otto Warmbier is the second person from southwest Ohio to be detained in North Korea in less than two years. A Dayton-area man, Jeffrey Fowle, was held for nearly six months in 2014.

North Korea’s state media said the University of Virginia student entered the country under the guise of a tourist and plotted against North Korean unity with “the tacit connivance of the U.S. government and under its manipulation.” The date of his arrest was unclear, as were any details of what he did.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich, campaigning in New Hampshire as a Republican presidential candidate, called the arrest “inexcusable.” His Columbus office released

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a letter he sent to President Barack Obama, urging his Democratic administration to “make every effort to secure Mr. Warmbier’s immediate release and keep (his) family constantly apprised.” Kasich said North Korea should either provide evidence of the alleged anti-state activities or release Warmbier.

A China-based tour company specializing in travel to North Korea, Young Pioneer Tours, confirmed that one of its customers, identified only as Otto, had been detained in Pyongyang, the North’s capital, but provided no other details.

Film academy president: ‘We need to step up’

Film academy president Cheryl Boone Isaacs says that despite the organization’s internal efforts toward inclusion, a second year of all-white acting Oscar nominees made her think, “We need to step this up.”

Boone Isaacs announced Friday that the academy will double the number of female and minority members by

2020, and will immediately diversify its leadership by adding three new seats to its board of governors, to be filled in the coming weeks.

The academy now aims for women to comprise 48 percent of its membership and “diverse groups” at least 14 percent as an initial step.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ 51-member board of governors unanimously approved a series of reforms late Thursday to “begin the process of significantly changing our membership composition,” Boone Isaacs said, following a weeklong storm of criticism and calls for an Oscar boycott because of the lack of diversity among nominees.

Some of Hollywood’s most prominent African-Americans, including Will Smith and Spike Lee, have said they won’t attend this year’s Oscar ceremony, which is to be hosted by Chris Rock.

Boone Isaacs acknowledged that the academy can only honor films that ultimately get made, but she thinks the changes announced today will “move the needle” in all aspects of filmmaking.

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