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War by Accident— What Are the Chances?

by **PAT FRANK**
of "Alas, Babylon" and "Mr. Adam"

On both sides of the Iron elaborate precautions have

ON MY TYPEWRITER I started a nuclear war. In time of
tension, an American carrier in the Mediterranean was
shadowed by a Red snooper plane. A catapulted Navy fighter
caught the snooper off the Syrian coast and fired a Side-
winder missile. The Sidewinder is a remarkable weapon, but
it has a one-track mind. Infrared sensors guide it to the hot-
test heat source within its vision and range. It doesn't care
who creates the heat.

In this case, the snooper cut its engines at the crucial
moment. Baffled, the Sidewinder darted for the next hottest
target, which happened to be a locomotive hauling a muni-
cations train in the port area of Latakia. Instead of running
up the tailpipe of the Red jet, the Sidewinder touched off the
train. Up went Latakia, and war started. Of course, this was
fiction, an incident in the novel, "Alas, Babylon."

Could war start by accident, in fact? The answer is yes—
but you can also get struck by lightning. The odds against
accidental war are heartening, and now a group of scientists
at Ohio State University has come up with proposals for
further reducing the danger. As the power and plenty of
nuclear weapons increase, so does awareness of the peril
within the atomic Pandora's box. New techniques against
accidental war are being developed. And the world grows
more sophisticated.

A few years ago, the U-2 flights over Russia or the shoot-
ing down of our RB-47 over international waters in the
Barents Sea conceivably could have triggered war. Now,
national tempers are damped by the realization of the awful
consequences of H-bomb war—without a real winner.

Several senior officers in the Pentagon gave me their per-
sonal opinion that even a nuclear explosion, either in the
United States or Russia, would not of itself start a war.
This would depend, naturally, on the scope of the disaster,
where it occurred, and the international climate at the time.
If Washington went up in a multimegaton mushroom during
a time of crisis, it is doubtful if the President (or his suc-
cessor) would wait for further proof of hostilities.

Five Ways to Trigger a War

At Ohio State, the Merston National Security Program,
dedicated to expanding public knowledge of our hazardous
times, assigned nine scientists under physicist John B.
Phelps to examine the entire problem. The Merston group
divided the accidents that could trigger general war into five
categories. Then they polled members of the Senate and
House foreign relations and military affairs committees, the
Rockefeller and Gaither Committees that had studied our
defense position, and military experts for their opinions.

The answers differed widely. Some thought danger in-
creases as armament grows. Others felt that as long as the
U.S. maintains the capacity to destroy any enemy, even after
receiving a surprise attack, no nuclear war can occur.

Most viewed the spread of limited war as the most serious
danger, with diplomatic miscalculation a close second. The
least likely was "catalytic war," that is, a plot by a third
nation to involve two others in nuclear holocaust. The two
categories that drew most comment were the possibilities
that war could be caused by human aberration—the act of
a madman—and failures in defense systems such as radar,
or faulty intelligence warnings.

New safeguards against accidents in these last two cate-
gories are constantly being developed. It is now a fact
that no single man, whether the pilot of a fighter-bomber
or the captain of a Polaris submarine, could use his nuclear
weapons to ignite a total war should he suddenly become

Curtain, weapons are at ready—but been taken to avoid their being triggered by mistake

deranged. Nor can war be triggered by a defective machine.
Not long ago the Strategic Air Command gave a dramatic
illustration of how these safety factors work.

One of the loneliest outposts of America's defense warn-
ing system is on a hill high above Thule, the big SAC base
on storm-swept Greenland. On this hill, in the predawn
hours, a sergeant fought sleep in the radar blockhouse. The
radarscope's slender green finger, relentlessly revolving,
sometimes has a hypnotic effect upon its human sentinels.

Suddenly, the sergeant awoke. A cluster of blips glowed
on the scope, racing toward North America over the Pole!
He clocked their speed at an incredible 2,000 knots. The
sergeant spoke excitedly into the intercom box.

Twenty seconds later, the blips—course and speed indi-
cated—appeared as red arrowheads on the war-room maps
of NORAD—North American Air Defense—in Colorado
Springs, Colo. Evaluated, they appeared to represent super-
sonic jet bombers, perhaps the spearhead of a surprise at-
tack, perhaps timed to hit our northern interceptor bases at
the same moment that nuclear-tipped ICBMs hit SAC bases
within the United States. An alarm went out to Alaskan and
Canadian interceptor fields, anti-aircraft Nike sites, the
headquarters of SAC in Omaha, and to the national command
post in the basement of the Pentagon.

It was midnight in the war room of SAC, nicknamed "The
Hole," 50 feet underground. The senior controller on duty
held NORAD on one phone while on another he spoke to
Gen. Thomas Power, SAC commander-in-chief, who had
been awakened by a tiny Klaxon at the head of his bed.
Power gave an order. The controller dialed two digits on
the red phone, automatically connecting him to every SAC
base. He spoke one code word. Fifteen minutes after Thule
radar had sighted the blips, hundreds of SAC bombers with
nuclear weapons were in the air, headed for targets.

Then the blips vanished from the radarscope as mys-
teriously as they had appeared! Their presence has never
been fully explained, except that in the far north there are
often strange electrical phenomena. And machines, like men,
can have hallucinations.

Immediately, a recall order went out by radio. What would
have happened if one of the bombers had not heard the
recall? The answer is—nothing. SAC aircraft operate under
a system called "positive control." They can go only so far
toward their targets. Then, if they do not receive a signal to
continue, they must return. If their communications fail,
they must return.

Furthermore, the signal to go on must be confirmed by

either the captain or copilot. No single crewman, because of
faulty hearing or sudden insanity, can decide to fly on.

Only the President of the United States can give the order
to unsheath our nuclear weapons. For this reason, the Presi-
dent is never out of communication with the Pentagon com-
mand post.

No nuclear weapons can be armed and fused until the
President so orders, and this applies to every weapons sys-
tem, including anti-aircraft missiles, long-range rockets,
fighter-bombers, and those of Polaris submarines and air-
craft carriers.

Talk to the Enemy and Listen

This country has taken every possible technical pre-
caution against one man starting a war. What of Russia?
Many military men believe that the Russian precautions are
equally stringent, but they fear that the danger will increase
when nuclear weapons come into the possession of more
irresponsible powers, especially Red China.

The odds against a major accidental nuclear explosion are
also remote—ranging from an estimated 100,000 to one to
1 million to one.

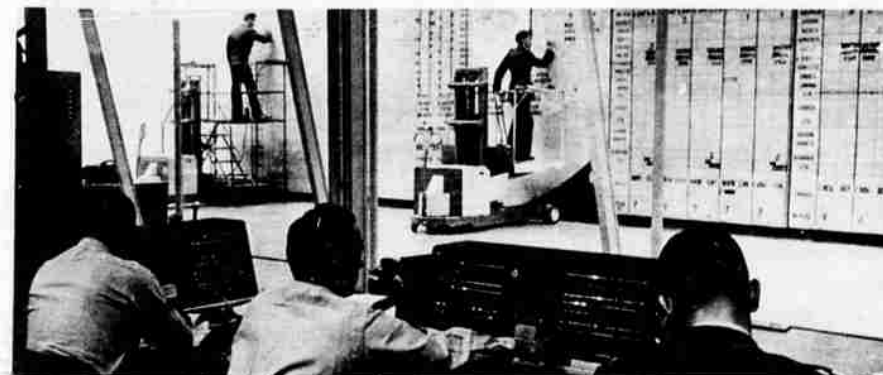
At least 12 times, nuclear bombs have been dropped by
accident, burned on runways, or in crashes. There has never
been any nuclear yield or significant radiation, even when
the TNT, which is part of the weapon's trigger, has exploded.

In considering this, the Merston group of Ohio State Uni-
versity has made a number of recommendations to lessen
the danger of accidental war. The scientists feel there should
be official and more open recognition of the possibility.

They are for "recognition, in practice, that the traditional
military principle which aims at keeping the enemy guessing
at one's intentions may be dangerously out of date." They
suggest "communication to possible enemies of the mani-
festly nonaggressive character of U.S. military plans and
preparations. More information on weapons-systems safety
measures can be released without compromising security."

And finally, the scientists suggest "a special study of the
possibility of providing very fast and reliable communica-
tion between top national leaders on either side to head off
a crisis before it leads to disaster."

As one high Air Force officer once told me, "The only
information we really need is what goes on in the minds of
the men in the Kremlin—and radar won't show that." Perhaps
what is needed is a direct telephone line between
the important desk in the White House and the important
one in the Kremlin.



At SAC headquarters in
Omaha, Nebraska,
three controllers keep
a careful watch on
the "alert" systems.
In the event of
an attack, U.S. bombers
are capable of acting
within 15 minutes.

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