



Explosive Accidents: The Lost Nuclear Arsenal at the Bottom of the Sea

Sep 3, 2018 **Ian Harvey**

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In July of 2018, Andrew Thaler wrote for Southern Fried Science that there were at least two nuclear capsules, four unarmed weapons, and one armed nuclear weapon sitting on the ocean floor, that he was aware of.

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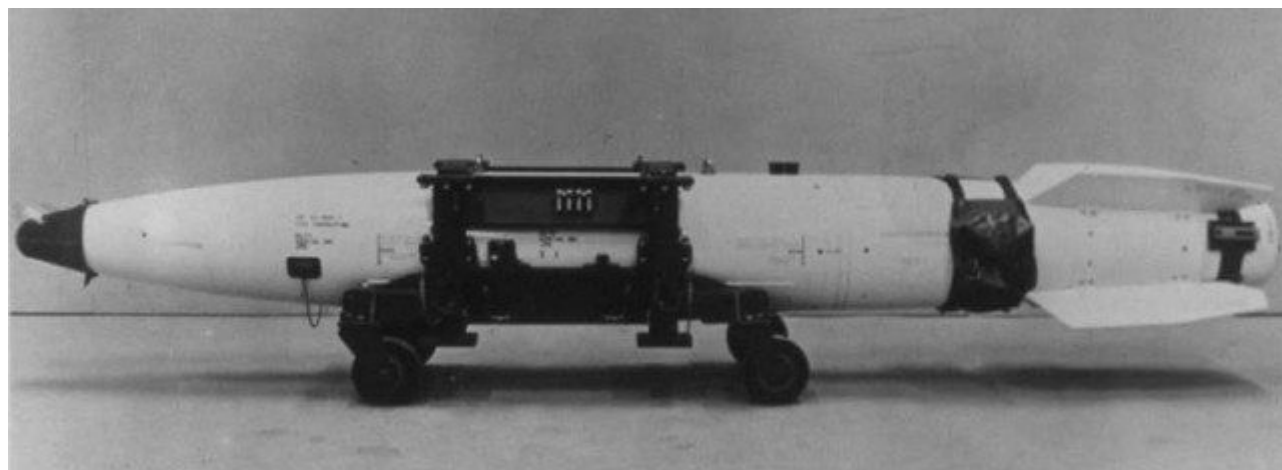
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His information was based on declassified U.S. Department of Defense narrative summaries of accidents involving U.S. nuclear weapons.

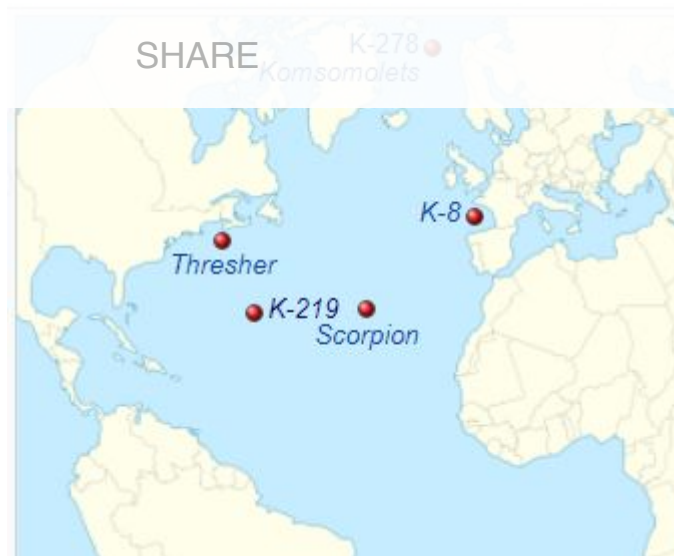
He noted that the documents he had access to only covered the period of time between 1950 and 1980. Any more recent data would still be classified. There is reason to believe that his estimated numbers for nuclear material in the oceans are far too low.



The B43 nuclear bomb. One of these is at the bottom of the ocean.

Business Insider in 2013 wrote that since 1950 there have been 32 nuclear weapon accidents, known as Broken Arrows, where an unexpected event involving nuclear weapons resulted in the firing, launching, theft, or loss of said weapon.

BI reported in this piece that there were six nuclear weapons that have been lost and never recovered. The time frames for the BI list continued into the 2000's, but this is also a lowball number.



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The location of sunken nuclear submarines in the Atlantic. Photo by Tentotwo CC BY-SA 3.0

According to a 1989 article in the New York Times, however, there have been *at least* 50 nuclear warheads and nine reactors scattered on the ocean floors since 1956.

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These were the result of various accidents on the part of U.S. and Soviet bombers, ships, and rockets, according to a study of naval accidents that was published by Greenpeace and the Institute for Policy Studies.

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Nuclear bomb blast over the ocean with mushroom cloud.

The study outlines 1,276 accidents, both nuclear and non-nuclear, on the part of the world's navies, and has some, more limited, information on another 1,000 accidents. The study points out that the total number of incidents amounts to one major peacetime accident a week.

Information for the study was gathered mostly through the Freedom of Information Act, which included American intelligence assessments of Soviet naval accidents.

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Eighty days after it fell into the ocean following the January 1966 midair collision between a nuclear-armed B-52G bomber and a KC-135 refueling tanker over Palomares, Spain, this B28RI nuclear bomb was recovered from 2,850 feet (869 meters) of water and lifted aboard the USS Petrel (note the missing tail fins and badly dented “false nose”).

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The authors also received information from the governments of other nations. The report said that the worst accident occurred in 1986, when a Soviet submarine sank 600 miles northeast of the Bermuda coast, depositing two nuclear reactors and 32 nuclear warheads on the bottom of the ocean.

That one accident left more nuclear material under the sea than the authors of the first two pieces posited, combined. The study also notes that it doesn't reflect data on any of the “many hundreds” of Soviet accidents about which little is known, and suggested that the Soviet Navy has far more accidents than those of America.

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The location of sunken nuclear submarines in the Arctic.

The accidents are, for the most part, due to human factors, ranging from issues of faulty navigation to outright sabotage.

So far, the U.S. has admitted to knowing of one hydrogen bomb that is leaking radioactive material. That bomb was accidentally dropped into the sea south of Japan in 1965 by an aircraft carrier.

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There is some likelihood that other bombs may have also begun to leak radiation into the water, and are just unknown as yet. Even if it hasn't happened yet, the chances of such leaks will increase over time as the weapons degrade, having the potential to cause untold harm to the oceans and our planet as a whole.

Amelia Earhart, aviation pioneer

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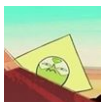


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**Sean Morgan**

The danger of nuclear weapons should never be trivialized, but the amount of radiation released from a leaking weapon is actually quite small in the scale of things- ocean currents will carry any such material far and wide into the surrounding waters, dissipating it to levels that are often all but undetectable. For anyone not immediately in the area of the source (i.e. within perhaps a few hundred yards to a mile), the chance of any harm being caused is almost infinitesimal.

Of course, the fact that such weapons are around in the first place and ready to be used on a hair's trigger should be much, much more worrying than any kind of potential radiation leakage. Cancer might be scary, but nuclear annihilation is much worse- and we have come terrifyingly close to worldwide catastrophe on multiple occasions.

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**Richard Hawkes**

Your assertion that "ocean currents will carry any such material far and wide into the surrounding waters, dissipating it to levels that are often all but undetectable" is very similar to some of the claims made by Windscale which people from Ireland, Norway & Newfoundland would dispute.

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**Randall Nix**

No mention of the Russian nuclear sub K-129 lost in the Pacific. The Glomar Explorer was designed to retrieve the missiles but according to reports that came out in the Watergate hearings, they failed.

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A Cat May Look

**Noel Wauchope**

This doesn't fill me with confidence about plutonium-powered space rockets, and Trump's plans for nuclear weapons in space.

Like · Reply · 41w

Quinton Hill

Yea nuclear weapons in space are worse than you'd think they become significantly more dangerous as the EMP resulting from the detonation will reach further and the implications from the early high altitude nuclear tests are that a small nuke can disable every unshielded piece of technology in an area the size of the pacific with relative ease.

Like · Reply · 1 · 40w

**Chris Strickland**

