

Dozens of Atomic Warheads Lost In Sea by Superpowers, Study Says

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Accidents involving American and Soviet ships, bombers and rockets have left at least 50 warheads and nine nuclear reactors scattered on the ocean floors since 1956, according to a comprehensive study of naval accidents that was released today.

So far, the United States has acknowledged that radioactive material leaked into the ocean from only a hydrogen bomb dropped accidentally into the ocean south of Japan in 1965 by an aircraft carrier.

The publishers of the study, the Greenpeace environmental group and the Institute for Policy Studies, a liberal research organization based in Washington, said it was likely that other lost nuclear bombs and reactors had released radiation. They said more contamination was "inevitable" when other sunken bombs and reactors deteriorate.

Greenpeace is using the report in its campaign against the deployment of nuclear weapons at sea and the use of nuclear propulsion for ships.

A spokesman for the Navy said the service had not yet verified the contents of the report, but it strongly disputed the conclusions. Human Failures Cited

The study, parts of which have been published previously, details 1,276 nuclear and non-nuclear accidents involving the world's navies since World War II and lists some data on 1,000 other accidents, a total that the report said amounted to one major peacetime accident each week.

Most of the accidents, it said, were caused by some human failure or frailty: faulty navigation, inadequate training or supervision and in some cases sabotage, vandalism or "some other kind of malevolent act."

The report said no information was available on possible radiation leaks from lost Soviet nuclear devices.

Data on the American accidents came largely from information obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, which included American intelligence assessments of Soviet naval accidents. The authors also received information from some foreign governments like

Britain's and compiled statistics from other published sources.

Greenpeace published the report amid heightened concern over safety on Navy vessels because of the explosion in April on the battleship Iowa that killed 47 sailors.

The report acknowledged that disaster and death at sea "are a fact of life," even in peacetime. But William M. Arkin, a military analyst for the Institute for Policy Studies who was a co-author of the report, said the number of accidents involving ships carrying nuclear weapons indicated that it was not safe to continue to keep such weapons on ships. Navy 'Extremely Proud'

In a statement, the Navy said, "There is no aspect of Navy operations that gets more emphasis, more attention, than the safety, training, operational procedures and material condition surrounding Navy nuclear weapons and reactors," adding, "We are extremely proud of our track record in this area."

The majority of the accidents detailed in the report, 799, involved American vessels. The study's authors said the report did not reflect "many hundreds" of accidents involving Soviet vessels about which little is known, and they suggested that the accident record of the Soviet Navy is far worse than that of the United States Navy. Soviet Accident Is Worst

The report said the worst accident involving nuclear weapons at sea occurred Oct. 6, 1986, when a Soviet submarine sank 600 miles northeast of Bermuda, leaving two nuclear reactors and 32 nuclear warheads on the ocean floor.

Most recently, a Soviet submarine powered by two nuclear reactors and carrying two nuclear torpedos sank in the Norwegian Sea on April 7.

The United States lost the nuclear-powered submarine Thresher 100 miles east of Cape Cod in 1963, and the submarine Scorpion sank in 1968 in more than 10,000 feet of water 400 miles southwest of the Azores. The Scorpion carried one nuclear reactor and two nuclear torpedoes.

Last month, as part of its publicity campaign for the study, Greenpeace and the Institute for Policy Studies disclosed that in December 1965 a jet carrying a nuclear bomb rolled off the American aircraft carrier Ticonderoga and sank about 70 miles east of the Ryukyu Islands.

The loss of the jet had been previously reported by the Navy, but the location of the accident had not been, and the disclosure prompted anti-military demonstrations in Japan.

On May 15, the United States told Japan that the bomb almost certainly burst under water pressure and spread radioactive plutonium. But, American officials said, there was "no environmental impact." Minor and Major Incidents

The accidents outlined by the Greenpeace study ranged from minor incidents like a fire in the tobacco store of the British Navy's H.M.S. Victorious in 1967, to disasters like the collision of the American aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy and the cruiser Belknap in November 1975, which killed 12 sailors and spawned fires that threatened the Belknap's nuclear weapons arsenal.

The most common kinds of accidents were collisions, 456 of them, including collisions of American and Soviet vessels, the report said.

The report also listed accidents of navy ships from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Egypt, Israel, Italy, Japan, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Turkey and Yugoslavia.

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