



# FURTHER REVIEW

# THAT TIME WE BOMBED NORTH CAROLINA

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On Jan. 24, 1961 — 65 years ago — an Air Force B-52 bomber crashed near Goldsboro, North Carolina, 60 miles southeast of the capital city of Raleigh. Aboard were two hydrogen bombs. Neither of the weapons exploded, nor was there any real danger of them exploding in an accident like this, the Pentagon said.

It wasn’t until 2013 that declassified military reports were released that showed: Um, yes, there very nearly *had been* a thermonuclear explosion during the Goldsboro incident.

## OPERATION CHROME DOME GOES WRONG

The United States was heavily engaged in the Cold War. The military stood ready to fend off an attack from its Communist rivals. Or to avenge an attack, if necessary.

One of the ways it did this was with Operation Chrome Dome. Multiple B-52 bombers were launched from bases throughout the Northern Hemisphere and kept in the air 24 hours a day, every day. Each plane carried two nuclear bombs. Each B-52 had to be refueled in air multiple times over the course of a day.

One of the otherwise sleepy Air Force Bases that participated in Operation Chrome Dome was Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in eastern North Carolina. On Jan. 23, 1961, a B-52 — leaking fuel and returning to base — suffered what officials called a “failure of the right



A U.S. Air Force B-52 bomber similar to the one that crashed in North Carolina.

wing.” The plane broke apart in mid-air. Eight crewmen were aboard. Five ejected safely. One ejected but was killed upon landing. And two died in the crash.

Aboard were two 3.8-megaton Mark 39 nuclear bombs. Each had the ability to detonate with a force 260 times more powerful than the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima at the end of World War II.



In 2013, the Department of Defense released declassified documents that showed that the breakup of the aircraft had initiated the firing sequence for both bombs. One bomb

that safely parachuted to the ground was prevented from detonating by built-in fail-safe mechanisms.

But the second bomb impacted the ground, which armed the device. Of the four safety mechanisms on the second bomb, three had failed to operate properly.

“By the slightest margin of chance, literally the failure of two wires to cross, a nuclear explosion was averted,” Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara at the time, and quoted in the declassified documents.

While this might have been the closest call for airplane-borne nukes, it wasn’t the only one. Over 30 years, at least 21 planes crashed with or accidentally dropped nuclear weapons. Another five incidents took place on runways or tarmacs.

One of the two bombs landed in a field and was found with its parachute draped over a tree. Pins that provided power from a generator to the weapon had been yanked, which prevented the bomb from going off. In other words, the fail-safe safety devices had performed their duties as designed.



The second bomb, however, was released later than the first. There wasn’t enough time for its parachute to deploy before it hit the ground. It took workers six days to find most of the wreckage, buried 20 feet in the mud. It was found that the impact had “armed” the bomb and it could have exploded, but this wasn’t revealed for another 52 years. Workers dug down to 42 feet below ground level before they abandoned the search for more components.

## 31 ‘BROKEN ARROW’ INCIDENTS OVER THREE DECADES

		AIRCRAFT	NUCLEAR DEVICES INVOLVED	
Feb. 13 1950	Off British Columbia	B-36	Mechanical issues, bomb jettisoned	●
April 11 1950	Manzano Base, New Mexico	B-29	Plane crash	●
July 13 1950	Lebanon, Ohio	B-50	Plane crash	●
Aug. 5 1950	Fairfield Suison AFB, California	B-29	Plane crash on landing	●
Nov. 10 1950	Québec, Canada	B-50	Mechanical issues, bomb jettisoned	●
March 10 1956	Mediterranean Sea	B-47	Plane exploded in mid-air	●●
July 27 1956	Base in Suffolk, U.K.	B-47	Plane crashed into storage facility	●●●
May 22 1957	Kirtland AFB, New Mexico	B-36	Kirtland AFB, New Mexico	●
July 28 1957	Off the coast of Delaware	C-124	Mechanical issues, bomb jettisoned	●●●
Oct. 11 1957	Homestead AFB, Florida	B-47	Plane crashed on takeoff	●●
Jan. 31 1958	Air base in Morocco	B-47	Bomb fell off plane while on runway	●
Feb. 5 1958	Savannah, Georgia	B-47	Bomb jettisoned after mid-air collision	●
March 11 1958	Mars Bluff, South Carolina	B-47	Bomb accidentally released	●
Nov. 4 1958	Dyess AFB, Texas	B-47	Plane crash	●
Nov. 26 1958	Chennault AFB, Louisiana	B-47	Plane caught fire while on ground	●
Jan. 18 1959	Air base in Korea	F-100	Plane caught fire while on ground	●

		AIRCRAFT		NUCLEAR DEVICES INVOLVED	
July 6 1959	Barksdale AFB, Louisiana	C-124	Plane crash	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
Sept. 25 1959	Off coast of Wash./Ore.	P-5M	Plane crashed on landing	<div><div></div></div>	
Oct. 15 1959	Hardinsburg, Kentucky	B-52	Plane crashed after mid-air collision	<div><div></div><div></div></div>	
June 7 1960	McGuire AFB, New Jersey	Bomarc missile	Fuel tank exploded	<div><div></div></div>	
Jan. 24 1961	Goldsboro, North Carolina	B-52	Plane crash	<div><div></div><div></div></div>	
March 14 1961	Yuba City, California	B-52	Plane crash	<div><div></div><div></div></div>	
Nov. 13 1963	Medina Base, Texas	Storage “igloo”	Fire broke out during disassembly of retired weapons	N/A	
Jan. 13 1964	Cumberland, Maryland	B-52	Plane crash	<div><div></div><div></div></div>	
Dec. 5 1964	Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota	Minuteman missile	Missile short-circuit separated the warhead	<div><div></div></div>	
Dec. 8 1964	Bunker Hill AFB, Indiana	B-58	Plane caught fire after landing	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
Oct. 11 1965	Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio	C-124	Plane caught fire while refueling on the ground	N/A	
Dec. 5 1965	“At sea, Pacific”	A-4	Plane fell off aircraft carrier	<div><div></div></div>	
Jan. 17 1966	Palomares, Spain	B-52	Plane crashed after mid-air collision	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
Jan. 21 1968	Thule, Greenland	B-52	Plane crash	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
Sept. 19 1980	Damascus, Arkansas	Titan II missile	Worker in missile silo dropped a socket wrench causing a fuel leak and an explosion	<div><div></div></div>	

Sources: “The Goldsboro Broken Arrow” by Joel Dobson, Department of Defense, National Geographic, CNN, PBS’ “American Experience,” the Guardian, This Day in Aviation, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation

ALL PHOTOS FROM THE U.S. AIR FORCE