



## ‘Damaged nuclear bomb’ at Dutch base was dummy weapon, Pentagon says

### Description

The Pentagon has said that a picture that featured in a report by the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) on Monday about apparent damage to a US nuclear bomb at a Dutch airbase was a dummy weapon used for training emergency response teams.

FAS published a photograph of a device being inspected for damage by US soldiers, including two from an explosive ordnance disposal unit, and a civilian. The rear of the device appears to have been twisted by an impact and one of the tail fins is missing. There is pink sticky tape covering an apparent hole.

The picture was included in a 2022 presentation for student job applicants by Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in New Mexico, one of the country’s nuclear weapons facilities, and it geolocated the image to the Volkel air force base in the Netherlands, one of six bases in five European countries where a total of 100 B61 nuclear gravity bombs are being stored as part of a nuclear-sharing agreement with the US.

A FAS blog by Hans Kristensen, the director of the FAS nuclear information project, said it was unclear whether it was a real bomb or a training model. The US air force in Europe and LANL would not comment on the photograph, but on Monday, after publication of Kristensen’s blog, the Pentagon said it was a dummy weapon being used as part of a training drill.

“At every military facility, we have a response team that has to train together, and that is what this was, and the photo was put in a recruitment manual,” Oscar Seára, a Pentagon spokesperson, said.

A spokesperson for the US air force in Europe would not comment directly on the photograph, but said: “The US maintains the highest level of standards for personnel and equipment supporting the strategic arsenal, which includes routine training, maintenance and security activities, to safeguard America’s critical capabilities.

“It is US policy [that] we can neither confirm nor deny the presence or absence of nuclear weapons at any general or specific location, including specific exercise or real-world operations.

The Los Alamos National Laboratory said in an emailed statement: “No additional information is available for that photo.”

The B61 bomb is the only tactical nuclear weapon left in the US arsenal, and 100 of them are stored in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Turkey. The bombs remain US property, but aircrews from six other Nato allies (the five hosts plus Greece) are trained to put them on planes and fly them. In the event of hostilities, it would require the agreement of the US, the Nato nuclear planning group and, by dint of the history of the arrangement, the UK prime minister, for the weapons to be transferred to allied planes. Such nuclear-sharing operations are practised each year in Nato’s Steadfast Noon exercise, most recently in November, and since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Poland has asked to be part of the arrangement.

Arms control advocates have long argued that the B61 is militarily obsolete and should be withdrawn from Europe as an easy step towards disarmament. The Obama administration contemplated its withdrawal, but met with resistance from some European allies, who saw it as symbolic of the US nuclear umbrella protecting them, and the idea was dropped altogether following Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014.

Instead, the weapon was modernised and the new version, the B61-12, is due to be delivered to Europe. In November, C-17A transport planes were given safety approval to carry B61-12 nuclear bombs, and Kristensen noted that a C-17A plane flew from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Volkel airbase a week ago, though he cautioned that did not prove that it was carrying B61-12 bombs.

“The B61 bomb is about as safe as a fully assembled nuclear weapon can be. It has good safety mechanisms and insensitive high explosives that won’t detonate if exposed to fire, shock, shrapnel, etc,” said Eric Schlosser, the author of *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety*. “The warheads routinely trucked from the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Berkshire to the Trident submarine base on the west coast of Scotland are a lot more problematic. You could get significant plutonium scattering or even a small-scale nuclear detonation during an accident or a terrorist attack – and those warheads are also more vulnerable to sabotage.”

by Julian Borger

### Category

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