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DEFENCE

(accidental US
nuclear alert)

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Confidential filing

Accidental US ^{NUCLEAR} Alert

DEFENCE

58
830

November 1979

Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date
13-11-79 16.11.79							
PREM 19/17							

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Defence 3



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1
Telephone 01-~~2307822~~ 218 6169

SECRET

16th November 1979

MO 12/2/4 (PQ 0472C)

Dear Michael,

Prime Minister

16/11

Thank you for your letter of 13 November asking for a note on how it was possible to discern so rapidly that the US alarm indicators were activated in error.

The Ballistic Missile Early Warning Station (BMEWS) at RAF Fylingdales is in constant voice contact with the North American Air Defence (NORAD) Command. When an alarm is registered by the automatic system, a checking process is immediately instigated by highly trained NORAD and BMEWS personnel into the integrity of their systems and NORAD are also able to check against information available to them from other early warning systems. An emergency does not formally exist until these staffs confirm that their checking has revealed no faults, and that they believe the information to be correct.

In this case RAF Fylingdales found no corroborative information on their own displays of the supposed missile attack, and they knew also that NORAD had just been engaged in an exercise involving frequent display changes (the system is constantly being tested in this way). The information was, therefore, considered suspect but Fylingdales continued their integrity checks. Almost immediately NORAD confirmed that the transmission was the result of an error in the computer: NORAD was receiving no information from any of the three BMEWS - the other two are in Alaska and Greenland - that would confirm the warning, nor had any other US warning system indicated a danger. It was, therefore, clear that the alarm was false and that the error was within the system.

Done over
Search Paper
(D T PIPER)

Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street

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HS

Defence
of 20/11

13 November 1979

The Prime Minister has seen your letter to me of 12 November about the accidental US alert. The Prime Minister has asked how we were able to discern so rapidly that the US alarm indicators had been activated by information that was suspect. I should be grateful if you could let me have a note on this.

MICHAEL ALEXANDER

D.T. Piper, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence.

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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1
Telephone 01-~~9307020~~ 218 6169

SECRET

MO 12/2/4

Handwritten initials

12th November 1979

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Primi Minister

Dear Michael,

*Amtd.
- 12/41*

I understand that the Prime Minister would like to have a report on the accidental US alert, which received press attention over the weekend. The facts are as follows.

How

On Friday 9th October at 1608 hours the US alarm indicators in the operations centres of the MOD, BMEWS Fylingdales, HQRAF Strike Command and C in C Fleet Northwood registered an advanced alert state. There was no indication from the Fylingdales radars of any threat to the UK, and indeed within seconds the information was shown to be suspect. Within a minute of receipt of the original US notification the North American Air Defence (NORAD) Command had indicated that the warning was a false alarm.

The reason for the error was explained in a US Department of Defense statement issued on 9th November, as follows. "At 1050 am (Eastern Seaboard Time) on 9th November 1979 a test tape was loaded on the North American Air Defence (NORAD) command computer as part of a computer test. The tape simulated a missile attack against North America. Through possible mechanical malfunction the tape was transmitted to a number of other commands and agencies. The error was corrected within six minutes. The incident is under investigation."

The Pentagon have also explained to us that as a result of the error ten fighter-interceptor aircraft had been scrambled from their bases: two F-106s from Oregon, two F-106s from Michigan, and six F-111s from British Columbia, Canada.

/ The ...

M O'D B Alexander Esq
No 10 Downing Street

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The aircraft had been swiftly recalled. To the knowledge of the Pentagon no forces in Europe had been involved. Our own forces' reaction was confined to a precautionary declaration of "cockpit readiness" to the Phantom aircraft on ten minute standby, although the fault was diagnosed before the crews actually entered the cockpits.

BMEWS Fylingdales issued a statement on Saturday to the "News of the World" saying that "the event had happened and that Fylingdales had received an alert signal from the early warning network but that the UK screens were clear. Checks were made and showed up a fault within 30 seconds." The MOD duty press officer reflected this line in response to enquiries and the press office at 10 Downing Street was informed. Further detailed information on the incident must await the outcome of the US investigation.

I am copying this letter to Paul Lever in the Foreign Secretary's Office and to Martin Vile.

Louis Jones

Allen Piper

(D T PIPER) 

SECRET

SECRET

12 NOV 1979





L.S.
Aunt

10 DOWNING STREET

Prime Minister.

You may wonder why you were not involved in the false alarm concerning US strategic forces yesterday evening. The early warning station at Fylingdales was alerted and identified the alert as a false alarm within 30 seconds - evidently rather more rapidly than the Americans themselves - so you were not troubled.

Aunt

12-11-79

101700Z

ADVANCE COPY

IMMEDIATE

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VWONF0057/10

OO F C O (DESKBY 101700Z)

OO MODUK (RESIDENT CLERK)

RR UKDEL NATO

GRS 220

UNCLASSIFIED

FM WASHINGTON 101630Z NOV 79

DESKBY F C O 101700Z

PS
R/LPS
R/M Ridley
R/bus
AL P Mobilly
Ld N S Lenthox
Hds Defma D
N An D
News D
R. C
N° 10 d S.

Files

TO IMMEDIATE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE
TELEGRAM NUMBER 3660 OF 10 NOVEMBER 1979
INFO IMMEDIATE MODUK (RESIDENT CLERK), ROUTINE UKDEL NATO.

YOUR TELNO 1616: US STRATEGIC ALERT.

1. LAST NIGHT THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE ISSUED THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT:
QUOTE AT 10.50 AM EST ON 9 NOVEMBER 1979 A TEST TAPE WAS LOADED ON THE NORTH AMERICAN AIR DEFENCE (NORAD) COMMAND COMPUTER AS PART OF A COMPUTER TEST. THE TAPE SIMULATED A MISSILE ATTACK AGAINST NORTH AMERICA. THROUGH POSSIBLE MECHANICAL MALFUNCTION THE TAPE WAS TRANSMITTED TO A NUMBER OF OTHER COMMANDS AND AGENCIES. THE ERROR WAS CORRECTED WITHIN 6 MINUTES. THE INCIDENT IS UNDER INVESTIGATION UNQUOTE.
2. THE PENTAGON EXPLAINED TO US TODAY THAT AS A RESULT OF THE ERROR TEN FIGHTER-INTERCEPTOR AIRCRAFT HAD BEEN SCRAMBLED FROM THEIR BASES: 2 F-106'S FROM OREGON, 2 F-106'S FROM MICHIGAN, AND 6 F-111'S FROM BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA. THE AIRCRAFT HAD BEEN SWIFTLY RECALLED TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE PENTAGON, NO FORCES IN EUROPE HAD BEEN INVOLVED.
3. THERE IS A MINOR REFERENCE TO THE INCIDENT IN TODAY'S PRESS, WHICH NOTES THAT CARTER, BROWN AND GENERAL JONES WERE NOT (REPEAT

3. THERE IS A MINOR REFERENCE TO THE INCIDENT IN TODAY'S PRESS,
WHICH NOTES THAT CARTER, BROWN AND GENERAL JONES WERE NOT (REPEATED
NOT) NOTIFIED OF THE FALSE ALERT.

4. FOR FURTHER INFORMATION IF REQUIRED, YOU COULD CONTACT THE
PENTAGON (COL ZENK 202/697-5131) OR NORAD IN COLORADO DIRECT (COL
O'BRIEN 303/598-5383)

ROBINSON

NNNN

ORU

[Faint handwritten notes and markings are visible in the lower half of the page, including a vertical list of names or initials on the right side.]

END

Filmed at the National
Archives (TNA) in London

February 2010