UNAUTHORISED HISTORY

Dangers of the nuclear convoys

FOR THREE DECADES and more, British foreign policy and military practice — even industrial organisation — has been bound up with the deployment of nuclear weapons. Proposed first as guarantees against Doomsday, British nuclear devices are now adapted for almost every level of land, sea or air war. No serious international conflict could avoid the use of thousands of nuclear weapons held by British forces, or based in Britain.

This huge programme has developed, not merely in secret, but under cover of an official mythology which employs every tactic from D-notice auto-censorship to downright lying. As Lord Zuckerman and other distinguished figures have acknowledged, the military-nuclear system has escaped from any real political control: prima-facie, the reason is secrecy, which allows 'debate' only after decisions have in fact been taken.

This series begins the task of providing a real history and anatomy of Britain's nuclear 'deterrent' and its outgrowths. First, DUNCAN CAMPBELL reveals that 'The Bomb' is no single, isolated device: but a complex system of dangerous machinery constantly on the move through Britain's cities.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS, like most other freight, travel by British Rail at dead of night: marshalled from siding to siding under the care of a BR computer called TOPS. On 12 March, one such shipment arrived at Clapham Junction in south London, at 3am. Two hours later, it reached the naval dockyard at Chatham, where nuclear submarines and a minor NATO fleet had put in.

By the time this story is published, another train with nuclear weaponry aboard is likely to have pulled out of Chatham and made its way north through central London.

We have obtained precise details of last month's shipment — in 'Special Traffic Notice No 86' — and other particulars of the nuclear-weapons traffic which ramifies in secret across much of urban Britain. In the elevated debate over strategic capacity, it is often forgotten that well over a thousand nuclear 'devices' now exist in Britain's own home-made arsenal.

'The Bomb' often figures in imagination as a large, inert object safely stored in some remote silo. In reality, it is a highly complex industrial system, processing and re-processing intensely dangerous materials: constant servicing and modification is required to keep the weaponry ready to fire.

This system has grown up over 30 years, practically without public audit. According to ex-military officers, the manner of shifting nuclear weapons around the country follows long-established practice, with no attempt made to route trains or road-convoys away from population-centres.

To secrecy is added a mythology of safety. The Ministry of Defence has repeatedly stated that there 'has never been any accident' to nuclear weapons stored in Britain. That statement, as we show later, is probably untrue in at least one case of which the MoD must be aware. But it is also generally implausible, for official admissions — extracted with difficulty — in the United States show that the US nuclear weapons system has generated at least 27 major accidents involving nuclear material.

We have, and will quote, examples of the official lies which have been readied *in advance* to restore public confidence in the event of a nuclear accident being discovered: they make an interesting contrast with the rather more realistic manuals used by the military themselves. But the central point to note is that, on present policies, the size, complexity and intrinsic danger of Britain's military-nuclear system is growing steadily.

TRAINS like that in Special Freight Notice 86 traverse London every couple of months, according to BR staff: another, for instance, passed on 26 February. Their configuration is unique, usually containing just three pieces of stock.

Two, called BSKs, resemble ordinary coaches, with seats and luggage space. But the records held in the TOPS* computer identify both vehicles in the 12 March train — numbers 99150 and 99151 — as 'Army Personnel Carriers'. They have an 'observation saloon' from which to watch sensitive cargo, and five sleeping-berths in the luggage-space.

In these two coaches travel the Escort Team, of up to a dozen MoD, military or RAF police armed with 9mm Browning automatics in shoulder holsters.

The 90-foot 'special vehicle' runs on two large bogeys, and weighs more than 100 tons: one of an exclusive series owned by the MoD. None of the public lists used by train-spotters include the number on the 12 March vehicle, 95780. But on the TOPS record this is described as a 'Missile Carrier', and has an even more exotic companion, 95781, identified as a 'Mobile Rocket Launcher'.

Three others, 95784-5-6, are listed as 'on loan to a foreign entity', which is obviously the United States. (Many US nuclear sites have BR sidings.)

In recent years, trains containing this Missile Carrier and its companions have travelled between points as far afield as the Windscale reprocessing centre, and naval dockyards at Rosyth, Chatham and Devonport, and Fort William in the Scottish Highlands (first major station up the line from the Clyde submarine base).

The MoD is responsible for all movement of 'special nuclear materials': weapons and components are in heavily-shielded containers and are crane loaded onto the carrier. Sometimes, such shipments deal with waste from the reactors of nuclear-powered submarines. But this differs little from civil-reactor waste, which is shipped regularly in substantial quantities without armed escort.

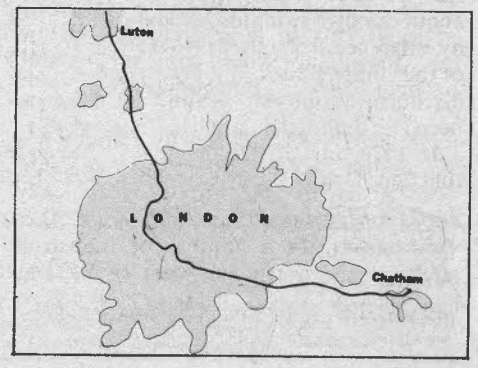
SPECIAL TRAFFIC NOTICE 86, which was issued by BR Southern Region, suggests that the Rosyth-Chatham train was left in the Cricklewood goods depot for some time in the small hours of 12 March, finally travelling on through Kew, Clapham, Streatham, Bromley and other Kent towns. It was coded 6X29.

Two weeks earlier, 6X04 took special nuclear material from Chatham to Windscale in Cumbria. There, the UK Atomic Energy Authority still controls a small, very secret Plutonium Recovery Facility for military use. This produces plutonium for new weapons, and purifies the material in existing bombs: requiring a constant traffic in bombs and components.

Most goes by rail, though there are also road and sea shipments. There is, for instance, an established Chatham-Windscale route via London, Luton, Bedford, Leicester, Chesterfield and Rotherham. So far, there has been no equivalent of the widespread public concern over the much less hazardous business of shipping civil nuclear waste — but the reason is simple. Whitehall classifies all such movements as SECRET or above, and refuses to discuss them.

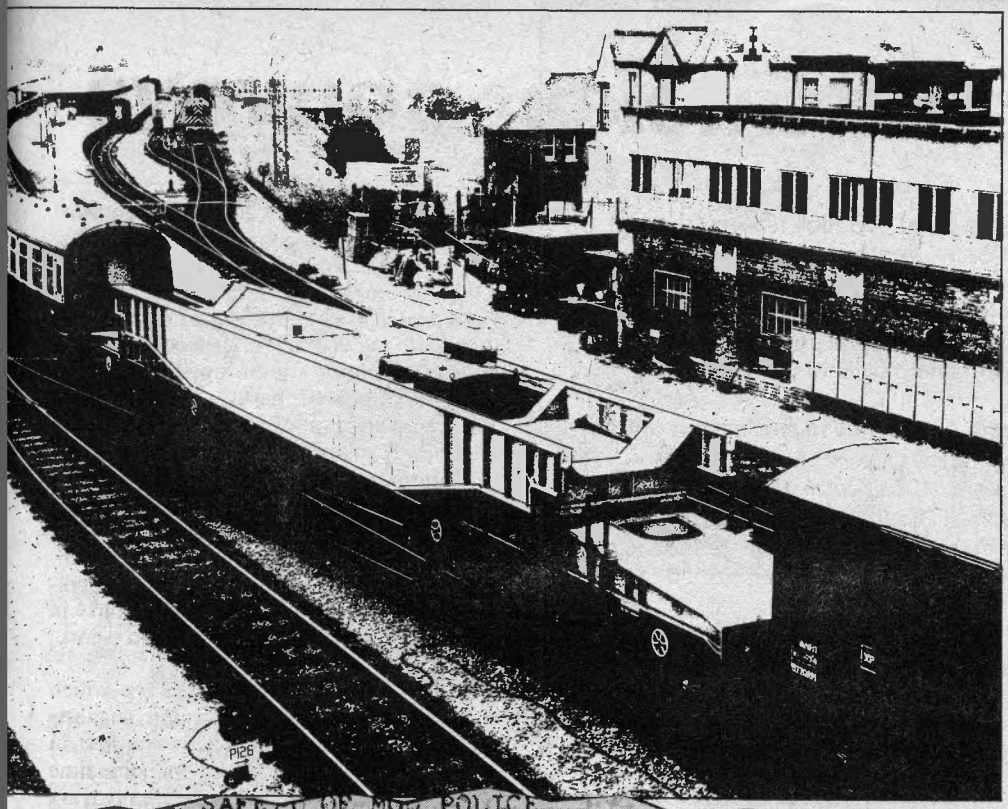
Road-borne nuclear 'devices' travel by equally well-established routine. 'Civilianisation', in order to produce a low profile, is the keynote, according to ex-servicemen.

Nuclear warheads and 'special nuclear materials' travelling to and from the Chatham base take the shortest railway route through central and suburban London. Right: the Special Freight notice refers obliquely to the cargo as a 'loaded radioactive flask'.



Additional research by Nick Anning, Mike Ricks and Evan Wylie.

*Total Operational Planning System.



SAFETY OF MOD POLICE

1. MOD Police travelling in the Observation Saloon must en route (ie for Meals, change of shift etc), until t Traffic Inspect

One of the Ministry of Defence's 'special vehicles' for carrying nuclear weapons. This one, No 95780, a missile Carrier, was built by Rolls Royce. It is currently at Chatham (redrawn on poor-quality photograph). Inset: extract from the special traffic notice issued to warn rail staff.

Conventional ammunition convoys consist of many trucks, with conspicuous police escort: three or four 'nukes', though, can travel in one truck.

The MoD has special vehicles for the job, carrying civil-style registration, and painted in bland colours. Two saloon cars, perhaps Hillman Hunters, will travel before and behind a Bedford or Ford truck; ex-military observers have recognised the formation in Dover, Felixstowe, Manchester and elsewhere, but civilian eyes will normally notice nothing — although some sources state that in any week several such convoys will pass between the dozens of bases which have Special Storage Areas (SSAs) for nuclear weapons.

Normally, RAF Hercules aircraft are used for air-movement of British nuclear weapons. During the 1960s there were weapons in Singapore, Malaya, Aden and Cyprus. But now the traffic chiefly consists in replacement and refurbishment of German-based 'devices'.

AS OFTEN, much crucial information about our own situation has to be developed by inference from the less-secretive society of the United States. But even there, official discourse on nuclear-weapons practice has been less than frank, and less than reliable.

In 1976, the US Department of Defence told Sen. Daniel Inouye that there had been 97 nuclear weapons accidents or incidents up to then: roughly one *every three months* during the nuclear-stockpile's lifetime.

Against this the British Government's bland claims to perfection are less than credible. This week, Robin Cook MP asked for details of accidents to nuclear weapons held by British forces, and circumstances which had led to risk of accident. He was told:

> No accidents have occurred involving damage to nuclear weapons held by British forces and because of the stringent safety precautions which are taken at all times the risk of such damage is minimal.

An even bolder statement has been handed to the general public. In its Cruise Missile brochure, sown especially thickly around the proposed base-areas at Molesworth and Greenham Common, the Ministry of Defence ask rhetorically:

> Are Nuclear Weapons safe? What happens if there is an accident? — Nuclear weapons have been stored in this country for many years. There has never been any accident or leakage.

This lie, issued in July 1980, is readily exposed. The Pentagon has just issued an — obviously incomplete — list of nuclear-weapons accidents, which includes the case of a B-47 nuclear bomber which crashed on 26 July 1956 directly onto the nuclear-bomb store at RAF Lakenheath, hitting

> . . . a storage igloo containing several nuclear weapons. The bombs did not burn or detonate.*

Although there was no nuclear explosion, the weapons — reportedly, Mark 6 atomic bombs — were badly damaged. The definition used by the US Army says an accident is

> . . . any unplanned occurrence involving damage, loss or destruction of, or serious damage to nuclear weapons or their pertinent components . . . which results in an actual or potential hazard to life or property. (Army Regulation AR360-43, 1972)

Those present at Lakenheath on the day were in little doubt about the existence of such hazards. As British fire engines arrived to assist base fore teams, they passed a convoy of US women and children being rapidly evacuated.

The US fire chief was clearly in no doubt about the potential risks. The aircraft's fuel had spilled onto the 'igloo', and he directed foam-spraying units to concentrate wholly upon the weapon-store, allowing the crew inside the nearby aircraft to be sacrificed. According to original US reports, all three bombs in the igloo were damaged, and this is not denied in the Pentagon's latest version.

When I visited Lakenheath last week, the nuclear-weapon store was still in the same position, a few yards from the NE-SW runway. It still stores weapons for F-111 nuclear bombers parked nearby, and it is considerably closer to Lakenheath village than it is to the military housing south of the airfield.

A GUIDE to official behaviour can be found in the fact that at the time the accident occurred the US, with British collusion, was still denying that there were *any* nuclear weapons in Britain. Even today, frankness is not the rule, and US Army regulations state:

> Normally the presence of nuclear weapons '. . . will be neither confirmed nor denied . . . However in the event of a serious accident involving a nuclear weapon official confirmation may be made when it will have value for public safety or for reducing or preventing widespread public alarm . . .'

Noting that radiation teams might be seen arriving, or military evacuation noted, the regulations suggest 'an official statement of reassurance'. The US has four codes for 'unplanned occurrences', ranging from minor (BLUNT SWORD) to serious 'incidents' and 'accidents' (BENT SPEAR and BROKEN ARROW).

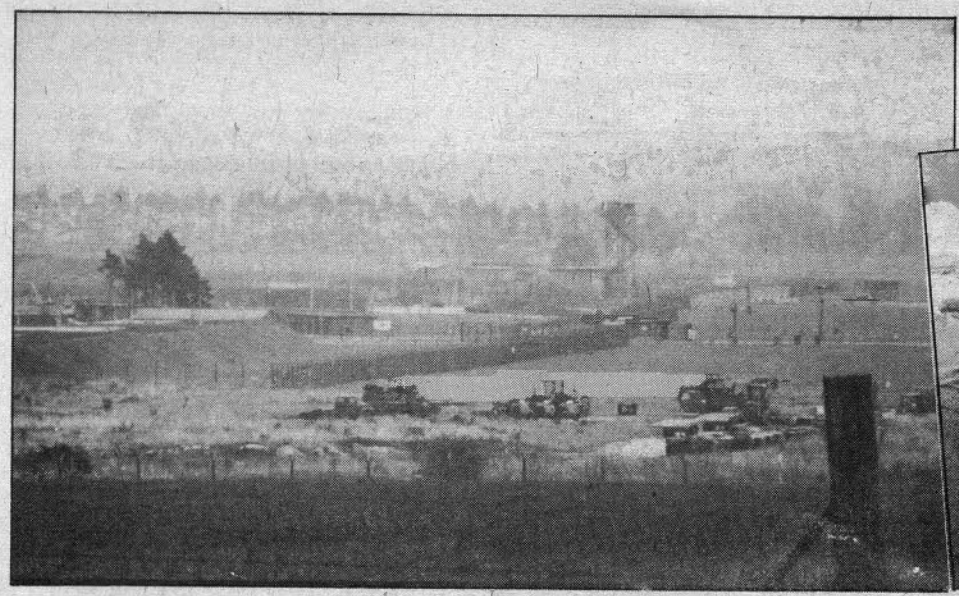
Most Broken Arrow accidents have involved destruction or detonation of the conventional explosives which have to fire extremely precisely to achieve a full-yield nuclear detonation. Such accidents generally will only spread radioactive components around — but this is no minor problem. After the late-sixties B-52 crashes in Greenland and Spain, each involving four large hydrogen bombs, thousands of tons of soil had to be removed in the clear-up. According to our MoD, an accidental nuclear explosion is 'virtually impossible', but the

FREIGHT TRAIN ARRANGEMENTS
EXCEPTIONAL LOAD

FROM ROSYTH to CHATHAM DOCKYARD via Kew East, Clapham Jn, Nunhead, Hither Green and Swanley.

DESCRIPTION Rolls-Royce Vehicle No MODA 95780 conveying loaded Radio-Active flask, accompanied by 2 BSK coaches Nos 99150 and 99151 with escorting MOD officials [illegible] with over buffers [illegible] lines.

*Although the US report does not indentify Lakenheath, publicly-available information makes the correlation indisputable.



Nuclear-weapon storage sites still located close to the main runway at Lakenheath, Suffolk — in spite of a major accident which the Ministry of Defence says never occurred. Right: H-bomb from B-52 recovered after 1964 accident of Palomares, Spain

official US manual, *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons*, is less dogmatic:

> There is always a possibility that . . . an explosion will take place inadvertently.

And in 1961, a 24-megaton explosion nearly occurred in North Carolina: a bomb was jettisoned from a B-52, and when it reached the ground five out of six safety interlocks had gone off, leaving one switch to prevent detonation.

BRITISH BOMB DISPOSAL teams exercise annually at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain, on ground 'sown' with radioactive tablets. Since they wear radiation-suits during this rehearsal for an event officials considered 'virtually impossible', the exercises are conducted out of public view.

Nor is there much doubt that 'unplanned occurrences' have taken place. The Clyde submarine base operates both British and American nuclear vessels, and in 1974 the commander and another officer of HMS *Renown* were accused of hazarding their ship: shortly after, it was revealed that previously a commander had been secretly reprimanded because of a collision between a Polaris submarine and a surface ship.

During the 1974 court-martial, the Navy evaded the legal requirement that one-day's notice must be given in a public place. All relevant RN press-officers from Rosyth went on leave shortly before the proceedings, which were kept secret because information disclosed 'might be useful to an enemy'.

And indeed official lies have been readied in case the 'virtually impossible' occurs. We have obtained Section 8, Volume 15 of the Clyde Submarine Base operations manual, which contains the draft of an announcement to be made by the BBC, Scottish TV and local radio stations:

> We have been asked to make the following urgent announcement. There has been a *slight* accident in the Atomic Reactor of a Nuclear Submarine which is at present resulting in a *small* release of radioactive products. There is *no possibility* of an atomic explosion. A *few* people may be asked by Police to move *for a short time* on the advice of health experts who are *already at work*. There is *no danger* to the general public, but the following precautions are necessary and must be taken in the vicinity of the incident to ensure that no harm is suffered (emphasis added).

The announcement then instructs people to eat no uncovered food or drink, and not to smoke or consume anything that has not been kept in a sealed container. A list of all dairy farms within 5½ miles of the Clyde is kept in order that all milk can be destroyed. But the base's own internal estimate of the consequences of a reactor-accident inside a ship which could be loaded with nuclear warheads is less emollient:

> The submarine will be converted into a source of radiation but initially only gamma radiation would be able to penetrate the bulkheads. As the heat and pressure in the submarine increase, volatile and gaseous fission products are forced out and released to the atmosphere. This cloud of fission products will pour downwind from the submarine . . . airborne radioactivity may spread over large areas and contaminate food and water supplies in addition to crops . . . children should be given priority in any evacuation scheme.

The manual's 'Clyde Area Public Safety Scheme' also describes, rather charmingly, the 'responsibilities' of the Local Liaison Committee of municipal officials:

> The Local Liaison Committee is to *reassure local opinion* on the hazards following a release of radioactivity from a reactor accident on a nuclear-powered submarine (emphasis ours).

Not, in short, a means of ensuring public safety, but rather a device to conceal the truth should an incident become public. The existence of such prepared positions must cast additional doubt upon the bland statements which assert, implicitly, that Britain's nuclear-military system has been technically altogether superior to the American one on which it is largely based.

ALTHOUGH, as we said, the history of the system has been almost entirely secret, it is possible to establish that there have been numerous crashes of aircraft whose chief role has been carrying of nuclear weapons. Even an incomplete list makes disturbing reading:

> 17 Vulcan bombers (13 in the UK); 10 Valiant and Victor bombers (all UK); 28 Phantom bombers (16 UK, US & RAF aircraft); 16 Buccaneers (7 UK); 16 F-111 (15 UK: all US); 4 Washington bombers (3 UK); 16 F-100s (13 UK; all US).

This already adds up to more than 100 crashes. And one Buccanneer crash, for instance, is of special interest. On 13 August 1977 an aircraft from Laarbruch flew to Machranish in Argyllshire and crashed on its return: although not a normal Buccanneer station, Machranish is a major nuclear-weapons store for the RAF and US Navy.

And, because of the steadily-increasing nuclearisation of the British forces — a phenomenon for investigation later in this series — aircraft other than nuclear-strike machines routinely carry nuclear devices. For instance, the designed payload of a Nimrod maritime-reconnaissance aircraft includes two Mk 11 British-made nuclear depth-bombs, and according to engineers familiar with Nimrod operating requirements, the weapons are carried on every long-range patrol, including training missions.

One such aircraft crashed last November at RAF Kinloss, near Inverness, with nuclear depth-bombs on board. Although the MoD claimed that the aircraft was unarmed, TV cameramen filmed signs posted around the crash site which warned that it was armed — and, as is customary, press photographers were kept away from the site for a considerable period.

The Pentagon's list of accidents, let alone the MoD's, is incomplete, which it attributes to 'differences of record-keeping among the services'. (To take one spectacular example of something likely to be an unlisted 'Broken Arrow': in May 1964, an F101 from Bentwaters in Suffolk suddenly crashed in Argyllshire. Although it was an obsolescent aircraft, a huge 8-day search operation was mounted, involving 24 aircraft and 4 helicopters.)

Briefly, the motto of the system is: if you haven't found out, we aren't going to tell you, and if we can't keep everything dark, we certainly shan't tell you the truth.

NEXT: How to spot your local nuclear-weapons store; plus a portrait-gallery of nukes.