

Safety Corner

What are the code words for nuclear weapon incidents?

The United States Armed Forces use a number of code words to define the magnitude and extent of incidents for internally and externally reporting nuclear weapon incidents. These code words are used by the USA, and are neither NATO nor global standards:

Faded Giant refers to an event involving a military nuclear reactor or other radiological accident not involving nuclear weapons.

Dull Sword includes minor incidents involving nuclear weapons, components or systems, or which could impair their deployments. It could include actions involving vehicles capable of carrying nuclear weapons but with no nuclear weapons on board at the time of the accident.

Bent Spear refers to incidents involving nuclear weapons, warheads, components or vehicles transporting nuclear material that are of significant interest. Bent Spear incidents include violations or breaches of handling and security regulations. An example of a Bent Spear incident is the flight of a B-52 bomber mistakenly carried six cruise missiles with live nuclear warheads.

Broken Arrow refers to incidents that involve nuclear weapons, warheads or components which does not create the risk of nuclear war. This includes nuclear or non-nuclear detonation of a US nuclear weapon, the burning or jettisoning of a nuclear weapon, or radioactive contamination from a nuclear weapon. As of September 2013, the US Department of Defense has officially recognized 32 Broken Arrow incidents, including the explosion of a nuclear-armed missile that caught fire and exploded in its silo and a number of incidents in which B-52 bombers carrying nuclear weapons crashed.

Nucflash refers to detonation or possible detonation of a nuclear weapon which creates a risk of an outbreak of nuclear war. Events which may be classified Nucflash include accidental, unauthorized, or unexplained nuclear detonation or possible detonation; or accidental or unauthorized launch of a nuclear-armed or nuclear-capable missile in the direction of, or having the capability to reach, another nuclear-capable country.

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