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These Frightening Nuclear Missile Transports

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Publication date: Thursday 5 January 2012

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Revelations have been made about an accident that had been kept secret: the judicial inquiry into an accident on Air-base 125 (Istres, near Marseille) reveals serious failings and errors in the road transport of strategic munitions.

An articulated lorry carrying strategic munitions overturning in an air-base - such an accident sends shivers up the spine, and its revelation a year and half afterwards is stupefying. Plus the damning conclusions of the judicial inquiry which unveils a succession of serious negligences and errors, aided by deficient monitoring by the military command.

It all shows that a risky routine, a frightening laxity on the part of personnel inadequately trained and under pressure, had been allowed to replace an absolute respect for the security protocols surrounding the movements of nuclear munitions carried extensively by road in 2010.

Three servicemen injured

These worrying findings follow an accident that occurred at Air-base 125 on 9 June 2010, but was kept secret. The human cost was three servicemen injured, one very seriously. Their lorry had set out before dawn from Air-base 702 (Avord, central France) and was not carrying any nuclear warheads.

The event was revealed furtively with the information that the driver is soon to appear before a correctional tribunal in Marseille. This 28-year-old chief-corporal will be judged on 16 January by a military chamber for "unintentional injuries", "putting armed-forces material out of commission", and "violating instructions."

The damage that the army blames him for is colossal, commensurate with the exceptional lorry that was wrecked, a VSRE (specially reinforced vehicle). The Strategic Air Force calculates this loss at 50 million euros.

A jogger came out of « K building »

That Wednesday, after a long motorway drive of nearly 600km via Bourges, Lyon, Macon and Orange, the lorry arrived at the gate of Air-base 125 (Istres). It was secretly attached to a unit which the inquirers didn't even know existed, the specialized technical support squadron. On board were three men whose names are withheld: two drivers and their superior, a security officer.

This blue monster of 33 tonnes and 585 horse-power was empty, we are assured, since it is travelling there to replace a broken-down armoured truck. Throughout 2010, large transports went to the base's very secret « K building », one of the 4 strategic depots for nuclear munitions in metropolitan France. It is even considered the most important. There, in underground galleries, are stocked above all the latest ASMP-A missiles for the Mirage 2000-N aircraft and soon the Rafale F3s. Catastrophes are always a diabolical chain of small failings. Here, the lorry was moving much too fast when, at 2.45pm, a runner appeared at the side on a bend. Yes, a runner wearing shorts and a loose singlet which even made the men laugh. "I noticed the presence of a jogger running on my lane towards me. I had to move to the left. In my rear-vision mirror I saw the trailer rise," explained the driver who had not been driving these trucks very long. He tried to brake over 67 metres but scraped at 21 metres and turned over on the verge.

« A total lack of control »

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Though injured, he and his superior managed to get out on the safety hole. The second driver stayed trapped in the cabin. Then he was taken by helicopter to Nord hospital with two broken cervical vertebrae and was bed-ridden for six months. The base's crisis plan was activated. Officers of nuclear security and military information barricaded the scene immediately and isolated the base's gendarmes so that no top-secret information could filter out. The chatterbox in this story is the lorry's tachygraph, which reveals that it was doing 72 km/h instead in a 30 km/h zone; this telltale also reveals that between Avord and Istres, the driver peaked at 105km/h, and had sped up to 120km/h ten days before! Yet the vehicle has a device that cuts the motors at 80km/h which can be deactivated only in a crisis situation by the superior officer. The inquirers went from surprise to surprise : « The personnel know how to neutralize the speed-limiter without breaking the protection lead », says that report in amazement. It then gasps at the « sporting conduct » of this young serviceman, who is sometimes « ill-disciplined » but whose « irresponsible behaviour » was aided by « a total lack of monitoring by the hierarchy ».

And there's more. Their training is inadequate. To take the wheel of an armoured Scania, only a semi-heavy licence is required (!) along with solid references, a TMD7 certificate (transport of dangerous radioactive materials) and « defense secret » authorization.

After accident, the driver is promoted!

This laxity shocked the ASND (Authority for Defense Nuclear Security). The drivers did not receive a "real training adapted to road-driving this rig in normal and inferior situations", and this "led to deficiencies in the driving behaviour of the squadron's drivers".

Under military interrogation, the drivers spoke of their "non-respect for pause-times and rest-times during the manoeuvres of loading and unloading sensitive loads ».

The young driver charged is really an airforce mechanic, a mere "road driver", who was a caporal in July 2009. The newspaper *La Marseillaise* reports a bizarre conjuring-trick : barely 15 days after this 50-million-euro crash, the human resources management of the airforce hastened to grant him (« by equivalence » with his elementary technician's diploma) the status of « road transport driver for heavy freight » with... back-dating to 1 March 2010 ! This promotion was signed for him alone by the Minister's delegation and appeared on 25 June 2010 in the Armed Forces Bulletin. We discover that now he is a chief-corporal. The judges will appreciate the nuance. Permit us to wonder whether the trailer was really empty?

« The Truck Jammed Again »

According to some mechanics, there were problems with the rig's braking system: « The previous day I had applied the brakes three times and the rig was short of air », said one driver. « We nearly had an accident several times », adds another, who reveals an earlier incident on a vehicle heading for Valduc, the site in Burgundy where nuclear warheads are built. He had to squeeze a leaking hose to brake the last few metres: « We had managed to reach the first gate of Valduc special military centre. The truck jammed again. We did not get the tractor doors open. (...) That did not prevent the departure of a new mission before the real origin of the incident was known.» And this is the sort of rig that rumbles happily along France's motorways` Recently the "Dépêche du Midi" published a photo of one travelling on the A61.

« The missions have the priority, before the safety of personnel », says an airforce mechanic who notes that the commanding officer has not even visited the bedside of the man most injured. When interviewed, the Boss of the squadron for transporting specialized materials, a lieutenant aged 37, admitted that since the start of 2010 « the loading plan became very difficult », « the number of missions went up, with transports in an extended rhythm of up to 3 or 4 weeks in a row (...) which is very tiring given the specific nature of this transportation ».

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« War is too serious to be entrusted to military servicemen », said Clemenceau decades ago. As for military justice, since 1982 it has been entrusted to civilian magistrates. But it is not unlikely that before 16 January the French Armed Forces, known for their proverbial "muteness", will lower with curtain of silence over this trial.

DAVID COQUILLE

La Marseillaise

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PS:

« Unacceptable things happened »

When reached by phone, Bernard Dupraz, the new Delegate for the Security of Defense Nuclear Installations nouveau (DSND), admits that this situation is abnormal.

« Unacceptable things happened with this empty specialized vehicle. The DSND intervened through its permanent duty to draw lessons from experience, but you will understand that this is a case of special transports and their contents are therefore classified. What I can say is that since then I know of no incident casting doubt on the safety of nuclear munitions transports ». This reassurance comes from the man who since last May has managed the observance of security rules for military and civilian personnel working on nuclear deterrence sites.

I contacted the Minister of Defense through the "nuclear affairs" group, but my request for an interview was not accepted.

Is this a consequence of the accident, or of the upcoming trial? France's " Journal officiel" published a ministerial memorandum of 7 April 2011 adding a hitherto unknown squadron to the list of military units whose missions require, for security reasons, that servicemen's names be withheld: the squadron for transports of specialized materials 91.532. The unit in question.

This body, which serves the Commissariat of Atomic Energy by transporting the components of nuclear munitions by road, had not previously been mentioned in any document. Its headquarters, Air-base 702 (Avord, central France) had concealed it from the radar, it had no official existence. The ministerial memorandum signed by Gérard Longuet now brings this special unit out of the shadows, and then immediately confers anonymity on its personnel, all except its commanding officer.

David Coquille