

Vietnam

388th Security Police Squadron

Korat AB Bomb Dump Explosion March 11, 1968

FOR THE COMMANDER, ROBERT M. HANSEN, Colonel, USAF Inspector General

Additional Information About The Accident:

Department of The Air Force
Headquarters, Thirteenth Air Force
APO San Francisco 96274
16 May 1968

Subject: Report of Explosives Accident

To: (Various Agencies)

(SAFETY)

1. The following is a resume of a recent explosives accident which occurred in a munitions storage area and involved M-117 bombs in their shipping configuration:

a. The Initial Explosion

At approximately 2100, a munitions crew consisting of qualified munitions personnel went to a barricaded aboveground magazine in the Munitions Storage Area. Their task for the night was to remove M-117 bombs from their shipping pallets and place these bombs on dunnage. The crew consisted of five airmen and one was assigned the task of driving a RT forklift that would be used to lift the bombs off their shipping pallets. Two were assigned the task of removing the empty wooden shipping pallets after the bombs had been lifted from them, and two were to perform the task of positioning on 4" x 4" wooden dunnage the bombs lifted by the RT forklift. The crew entered the revetment. A liteall NF-2, was started to provide illumination. After positioning the necessary dunnage, the crew proceeded through the use of approved Standard Operating Procedures. The operation started at the East end of a row of five stacks of palletized bombs. One airman drove in with the RT forklift and picked up a single bomb on top of stack 1 (numbering from the East). He backed up and after the pallet was removed, picked up the two bombs on the second level of stack 1. This gave him three bombs on the forks of the RT forklift. This was considered a normal load for the forklift. The airman drove the forklift around to where two airmen were ready to receive the bombs and place them on dunnage. After placing the bombs on the dunnage, the forklift returned to the East end of the row of stacks of palletized bombs to get three more bombs. The forklift then picked the 2 bombs off the top of stack 2 and began to back out in preparation for picking up one of the bombs that was on the remaining pallet in stack 1. When the forklift was approximately 15 feet East of the row of stacks of bombs, two of the airmen saw the top pallet of stack 5 (West end of row) begin to tilt. When the tilt of the pallet reached approximately 10 degrees from the horizontal, a low order detonation occurred. This fact was confirmed by two airmen in separate statements taken before they had a chance to discuss events. The time of the initial detonation was 2125 local. THE BOMBS IN QUESTION WERE IN THE SHIPPING CONFIGURATION (NO BOOSTERS, BANDED TO SHIPPING PALLET, NOZE AND TAIL PLUGS INSTALLED) AND WERE NOT BEING HANDLED IN ANY MANNER. The explosion was described as a fireball which rapidly enveloped the bombs. This explosion knocked two airmen to the ground and temporarily, partially blinded and deafened them, but shortly after this explosion, they ran over the revetment wall. The forklift driver was either knocked off his forklift by the explosion or jumped off while stunned by the concussion, but he evacuated the revetment by running out the

East opening. Two airmen who were approximately 10 feet from the explosion when it occurred were seriously injured at this time and were unable to leave the revetment. As a result of the explosion there were fires set throughout the revetment. The liteall and the coleman tractor attached to it were set on fire. The palletized bombs were partially scattered. The pallets were burning. Grass fires were started on all the walls. Dunnage was ignited and there were pieces of burning HE thrown throughout the revetment.

b. The Second Explosion

At the same time in the vicinity of the munition storage area office, at the Security Police guard shack there were five Security Policemen and four Thai guards. The Security Police present were members of two SAT (Security Alert Team) teams and one gate guard. At 2125 all personnel noticed a muffled explosion. One Air Policeman shouted to another that there was a fire in the area and that a crew was working in the general vicinity of where the fire was located. Calls were made in request of emergency vehicles and the Air Policemen responded to the fire. On arrival they saw fires encompassing the liteall and coleman tractor, the grass on the revetment walls, the bomb dunnage, the pallets the bombs had been resting on prior to the first explosion, and small intense fires scattered throughout the interior of the revetment. They also saw two individuals inside the revetment. One was lying in a burning area, the other was crawling about evidently not being able to tell where he was headed. The Air Policemen began to shout and the crawling individual responded and came towards them. As he came out of the revetment, they caught him and put out fires that were still burning on his body. An Air Policeman ran into the revetment, grabbed two buckets of water from the revetment fire barrel, ran to the individual who was lying in the burning area, and doused this individual with water. At this point, another Air Policeman ran into the revetment to assist and they carried the individual to the fire barrel which they tipped over on him to extinguish fires that were burning on his body. He was placed behind the East revetment wall and an Air Policeman volunteered to stay with him. Seven minutes had elapsed from the time of the first detonation. At 2132 there was a high order detonation. The two airmen by the East revetment wall died at this time. All other personnel were stunned and suffered temporary partial blinding and deafness. Shrapnel, exposed HE, and unexploded bombs were throughout the area. The remaining personnel were met by ambulances and other emergency vehicles. During the night, there occurred two low order detonations. These consisted of one M-117 bomb each time. The area had been secured and there was no further injuries. The times on the low order detonations were 0335 and 01415.

c. The Investigation

The same night, at approximately 2300, statements were taken from all other personnel involved in the accident and a survey of the area in and around the revetment was started. This survey included an EOD cleanup of the area. Distribution of fragments of HE, intact bombs, and shrapnel was plotted on an area map. Pictures of the damage were taken from a helicopter. Orders were published appointing a formal accident investigating board. The lot numbers of the bombs involved were identified and a random sample of remaining bombs of the suspected lot numbers was taken and held for investigation. A 100% inspection of these lot numbers was carried out without any visible defects being found.

A re-enactment of the events leading up to the incident was carried out in a revetment in the Munitions Storage Area. Two of the personnel who were in the revetment at the time of the original occurrence guided the operation.

The board determined there was no fire prior to the initial detonation. The two eyewitnesses had a clear view of the bombs in question. The liteall and coleman tractor were also in open view and a flash fire at either piece of equipment could not be mistaken for a detonation in the area of the bombs.

The initial detonation was a low order detonation consisting: of two M-117 GP 750 lb bombs that occurred at 2125 local. The detonation started in one bomb on the pallet in question and probably propagated to the other M-117 on the pallet. The second detonation was a high order detonation that occurred at 2132 local. This detonation was a direct result of the initial detonation and was caused by the burning HE and the fire that resulted from the initial detonation.

2. The exact cause of this accident is unknown. A suspected cause was identified and is being

reviewed by responsible commanders in their through channels indorsements to the formal report so it is not appropriate to comment on it in this letter.

FOR THE COMMANDER

ROBERT M. HANSEN, Colonel, USAF Inspector General

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