

Is New US H-Bomb Soon Ready?

Opinion by Manlio Dinucci

A video was released on November 23 by Sandia National Laboratories that shows a US F-35A fighter flying at supersonic speed 3,000 meters above sea level, launching a B61-12 nuclear bomb. The bomb did not fall vertically but glided until its tail section rocket ignition gave a rotational motion and the B61-12 (satellite-guided) headed for a target and hit 42 seconds after launch. The test was carried out on August 25 at the Tonopah shooting range in the Nevada desert.

An official US air force statement confirmed its “full success.” It was a nuclear attack simulation, proof that the jet fighter works at supersonic speed and in stealth attitude (with mock B61 bombs in its internal bomb bay) with the capability to evade enemy defenses, the air force said.

The B61-12 has been engineered to penetrate and explode deep underground to destroy command bunkers and other buried structures. The Pentagon foresees construction of about 500 B61-12s, at an estimated cost of 10 to 13 billion dollars (each 825-pound bomb costing double the value of its weight in gold).

It has been officially announced that production of the new nuclear bomb will begin in fiscal year 2022, beginning Oct. 1, 2021. The exact number of B61-12 bombs that the US will station in Italy, Germany, Belgium, Turkey, and Holland to replace the current B61s is secret. Satellite photos show that renovations have been carried out at Italy’s Aviano and Ghedi air force bases in preparation for the arrival of the new nuclear bombs, and the US air force F-35A. The Italian F-35s under US command will be armed with these bombs. The kind of situation Italy will be

involved in—once the F-35A aircrafts ready for a nuclear attack with B61-12 bombs are deployed on the Italian territory—is easily predictable.

Italy will aggravate its violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, joined in 1975, in which it pledged “not to receive nuclear weapons from anyone or control over these weapons, directly or indirectly.”

Italy’s “nuclear sharing” openly flaunts the new treaty ban, which states: “Any State Party that has nuclear weapons on its territory, owned or controlled by another State, must ensure the rapid removal of such weapons.” To throw a stone into the stagnant water of a Parliament that keeps silent on this subject, Independent Member of Parliament Sara Cunial presented a “question for written answer” to the Prime Minister and the Military and Foreign Affairs Ministries.

Th MP asks: “Does the government intend to respect the Treaty on Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons ratified by Italy in 1975? Does the government intend to sign and ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons that enters into force in 2021? Does the government intend to ensure, on the basis of what these treaties establish, that the United States immediately remove any nuclear weapons from Italian territory and give up installing the new B61-12 bombs and other nuclear weapons?” While we wait to read the government’s response, the latest bomb tests are carried out in the US, and the bombs will arrive and be set under our feet.

—Manlio Dinucci is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization and wrote this article for Italy’s *Il Manifesto*.

Air Force Veterans of Plutonium Dust Disaster Win Class Action Standing

By John LaForge

Air force veterans exposed to plutonium after a first-ever US nuclear weapons disaster in Spain have won extremely rare recognition as a class in a lawsuit against the Department of Veterans Affairs.

On Jan. 17, 1966, an air force B-52 bomber exploded over the village of Palomares, Spain during a routine airborne refueling. Seven airmen were killed and the bomber’s four hydrogen bombs were thrown to the earth. Conventional explosives (not the nuclear warheads) in two of the bombs detonated in massive explosions, one right in the village, gouging massive, plutonium-covered craters and spewing as much as 22 pounds of pulverized plutonium dust over houses, streets and farm fields.

On June 19, 2016, the *New York Times* published a 4,500-word investigative report about the lawsuit filed in the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims by chief master sergeant Victor Skaar (USAF, Rt.). Skaar, who was 30 at the time, was part of a clean-up team, dubbed Operation Moist Mop, assigned to the disaster response. A throng of some 1,700 soldiers were put to surveying 400 acres and washing the inside and outside of village buildings. Over a period of 80 days they filled 4,810 barrels with plutonium-contaminated soil and loaded the drums aboard a ship bound for disposal stateside.

Two years after Skaar retired in 1981, he came down with a blood disorder called leukopenia. He’s been trying ever since to have the illness recognized as service-related. In a phone interview, Skaar told Nukewatch that dozens of the veterans contaminated during the clean-up are also sick. If their claims can be established in court, they would be eligible for free health care and a disability pension. Sometimes “clean-up” amounted to hosing the plutonium dust. It was hosed off houses, streets and even a school, leaving the toxic runoff to contaminate downstream surface waters. When the barrels of collected soil had excessive radiation readings, troops blew the dust off using air compressors. When testing the troops’ clothing, radiation meters regularly went off-scale.

After the 2016 exposé in the *Times*, Michael Wishnie, a Professor of Law at Yale Law School who runs the Veterans Legal Services Clinic, called Skaar and offered the aide of the clinic in the case. It’s been a David and Goliath battle from the

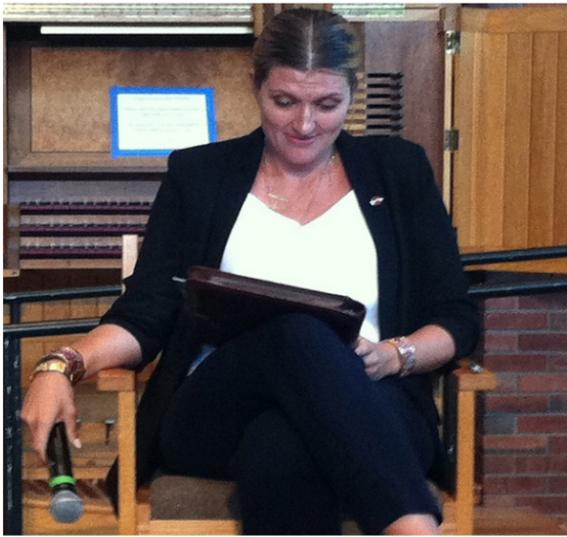
beginning. Skaar told the *Times*, “First they told me there were no records, which I knew was a lie because I helped make them.” The air force seems determined to keep denying responsibility until the surviving vets die off and the lawsuit becomes moot. Meghan Brooks, a former Yale clinic member, told the *Times*, “The bunk science the air force was using was not just harming Mr. Skaar, but all the other Palomares veterans. Mr. Skaar really wanted to fight on behalf of others,” she said.

After Sgt. Skaar’s three decades of relentlessly filing Freedom of Information Act requests and repeatedly appealing FOIA denials, he and the Yale team finally broke through. In a Dec. 6, 2019 decision the appeals court granted class action status for some but not all the Palomares veterans. The court also found that Skaar could serve as “class representative” for as-yet-unnamed class members.

Class action status for Skaar and the other appellants “represents a major step forward for veterans with long-term health issues linked to toxic exposure in the service,” the *Times* reported on Feb. 11, 2020. Then on Sept. 2, 2020, the court heard oral arguments in the case and accepted new evidence including a declaration by Dr. Murry Watnick, a former Strategic Air Command Medical Officer. (Full disclosure: Dr. Watnick is a longtime Nuke-watch supporter and alerted us to the class action.) Part of Watnick’s affidavit notes that, “The amount of plutonium-239 released was estimated to be approximately 10 kilograms [22 lbs]. One microgram of plutonium-239 is extremely toxic. The estimated release was three billion micrograms.”

Plutonium’s chief danger is from inhalation, because its deadly alpha particles lodge in the lungs “bombarding the adjacent cells with highly toxic ionizing radiation,” Watnick wrote. Troops involved were exposed to “plutonium dust six to eight hours daily in an environment highly conducive to inhalation of alpha particles.”

The class action is focused on the VA’s denial of Mr. Skaar’s claim of service-related illness, and the military’s “arbitrary and capricious” use of inadequate radiation data which is based on shoddy methods of recording and maintaining urine samples taken from clean-up crew members. The veterans also challenge the VA’s omission of Palomares cleanup operations from its list of radiation risk activities. The appeal is currently ongoing.



The open letter was coordinated by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, whose director Beatrice Fihn, above, spoke at Augsburg Univ. in Minneapolis in 2018. Photo by John LaForge

56 Former World Leaders Call for Ban Treaty Ratification

An open letter from 56 former heads of state, foreign ministers and military secretaries—including those from 20 NATO member countries, and from Japan and South Korea—was issued Sept. 19, 2020 urging the world’s current presidents and prime ministers to ratify the nuclear weapons treaty ban.

All the letter’s signers are from countries whose current heads of state have refused to embrace or promote the treaty. Among the signers are former leaders from Albania, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, and Turkey.

Former prime ministers of Canada, Japan, Italy and Poland are among the 56 signatories, and two—Willy Claes of Belgium and Javier Solana of Spain—are former Secretaries General of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Under US diplomatic and economic pressure to increase military spending and to ignore treaty obligations, no current NATO member state has yet ratified the nuclear weapons ban.

Pointedly, signers of the letter include former leaders from the five NATO countries—Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey—that station and train to use a total of about 140 US nuclear bombs that in a nuclear war on Russia would be unleashed from their NATO bases. In all five countries, overwhelming public opinion favors the permanent removal of the US weapons, something the treaty ban would necessitate if the governments ratified the law.

Church Leaders Urge Governments to Join Treaty Pope Calls Nuclear Deterrence ‘Immoral’

The Church of England’s top leaders have called on the British government to join 50 other nations in ratifying the new international treaty outlawing nuclear weapons.

The archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, and the archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, along with 29 Anglican bishops, have signed a letter published by *The Observer*, saying that the UK’s support for the treaty would give hope for a peaceful future.

Art Laffin of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker in Washington, DC, reports in the *National Catholic Reporter* that the Roman Catholic Church’s Pope Francis is the first Pope to condemn the mere possession of nuclear weapons. In a Nov. 10, 2017 address, he said in part, “If we also take into account the risk of an accidental detonation as a result of error of any kind, the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned.” Two years later, during a visit to Nagasaki, Japan Nov. 24, 2019, he said, “We must never grow weary of working to support the ... Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.” Visiting Hiroshima that day he said, “The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral.”