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Presenter: Major General Richard Newton, Assistant Deputy Chief Of Staff For Operations, Plans And Requirements, Headquarters U.S. Air Force October 19, 2007

DoD Press Briefing with Maj. Gen. Newton from the Pentagon, Arlington, Va.

MICHAEL WYNNE (secretary of the Air Force): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Mike Wynne, and I'm the secretary of the United States Air Force. I want to thank you for being here.

Normally it is our policy to neither confirm nor deny as to whether were nuclear weapons involved. In this particular instance, I'm going to make an exception, a one-time exception. You know that it would not -- we would not be this upset with ourselves nor be striving to restore confidence if this did not involve nuclear weapons. And that's where I think the exception to policy has to go.

Thank you for being here this afternoon. The American public has placed great trust and confidence in its Air Force to safeguard our country's strategic weapons. We have for the past 60 years and will continue to execute this important mission of providing security for all weapons.

However, as you know, nearly two months ago, a series of apparent errors led to a breakdown in munitions-handling procedures, and it resulted in our improper and unauthorized transfer of six weapons. This was an unacceptable mistake and a clear deviation from our exacting standards. We hold ourselves accountable to the American people and want to ensure proper corrective action has been taken.

As you know, when the incident occurred, we immediately established that there was never an unsafe condition and reported it our national leadership, including the secretary of Defense as well as the president.

At the same time, we promised the American public we would conduct a thorough investigation and present the findings of the investigation to our leadership, to our elected leaders and to you, the public.

General Ronald Keys, who was then commander of Air Combat Command, directed Major General Doug Raaberg to conduct a commander- directed investigation to find out the facts, to determine the causes and to identify corrective action. The report is complete, and we briefed he findings to the secretary of Defense this afternoon.

Today Major General Richard Newton -- goes by "Dick" -- is here to talk to you about the Minot incident.

But before I turn the podium over to General Newton, I want to assure everyone that additional decisive actions are being taken to aggressively examine and implement corrective measures at all levels of our Air Force.

The Air Force directed unlimited nuclear surety inspections at every nuclear-capable unit in our Air Force. Our major command Inspector General Offices are methodically conducting the investigations now.

Secretary Gates has asked retired Air Force Chief of Staff General Larry Welch to lead an ongoing Defense Science Board standing task force on nuclear weapon surety to review security procedures and look more broadly at DOD policies and procedures to ensure all factors that led to this incident are explored and addressed.

Also, Congress requested a top-to-bottom review of the Department of Defense and department Energy nuclear procedures. In addition to these, General Moseley and I charted an Air Force Blue Ribbon Review to examine all aspects of our nuclear weapons policy and procedure across all levels of our Air Force. We have asked Major General Polly Peyer to chair this Blue Ribbon Review and make recommendations as to how we can improve the Air Force's capability to safely and securely perform our nuclear weapons responsibility.

In regard to the command-directed investigation report, I received an outbrief two days ago and have had a chance to review the report myself.

I personally went to Minot and Barksdale Air Force Bases to see the process and ensure continued safe and disciplined operations. I spoke with Major General Raaberg en route, and we agreed that his investigation would be paramount. I firmly believe he has conducted a thorough and rigorous investigation. He provided us a solid understanding of what happened at Minot and at Barksdale, and we are making all appropriate changes to ensure that this has a minimal chance of ever happening again, but we would really like to ensure it never happens again.

General Newton is currently the assistant deputy chief of staff for Operations, Plans and Requirements here at headquarters. He's a command pilot with flight time in the B-2, the B-1 and the B-52. Additionally, he was commander of the 5th Bomb Wing at Minot from February of 00 to December of 01, so he is very familiar with the mission of our bomb wings and specifically operations at Minot.

He is here today to speak with you about what happened at Minot in late August, to discuss what accountability actions have occurred and to answer your questions.

Before I leave, I must stress that nothing in military procedures is more important than ensuring the control and custody of our weapons. We will determine areas that need to be held to higher account and hold those accountable who fall short of our standards. We're determined to understand exactly what mistakes were made and what changes are needed to ensure that they will not be repeated.

We know America counts on us. And through our steady, unwavering resolve and actions, our Air Force will live up to the expectations of our nation.

Thank you. And now I'll turn it over to General Newton.

GEN. NEWTON: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

This afternoon I will share with you what I can about how the weapons transfer error occurred, our corrective actions and our efforts to ensure accountability. The countless times our dedicated airmen have transferred weapons in our nation's arsenal, nothing like this has ever

occurred. This was a failure to follow procedures, procedures which have proven to be sound. It involved a limited number of airmen at two bases.

Our extensive six-week investigation found that this was an isolated incident and that the weapons never left the custody of airmen, were never unsecured; but clearly, this incident is unacceptable to the people of the United States and to the United States Air Force. We owe the nation nothing less than adherence to the highest standards.

In addition, our investigation found that there has been an erosion of adherence to weapons-handling standards at Minot Air Force Base and at Barksdale Air Force Base. We have acted quickly and decisively to rectify this.

Because of this error, we are aggressively examining and implementing corrective measures to our weapons-handling and transfer process.

Corrective actions will ensure our munitions are handled precisely and safely 100 percent of the time.

This week, the commander of Air Combat Command relieved several officers. Minot's Wing commander and Maintenance Group commander and Barksdale's Operation Group commander received administrative action and were relieved of command.

The commander of Air Combat Command also took four other specific actions to date at the group and squadron level, lieutenant colonel and below. But for privacy reasons we will not discuss specific positions, individuals or actions.

As you know, the Munitions Squadron commander at Minot Air Force Base was relieved shortly after this incident. The commander of Air Combat Command carefully considered individuals at all ranks and levels for accountability. In addition, he also took actions to temporarily or permanently decertify specific individuals from the Personnel Reliability Program. The Air Force Personnel Reliability Program ensures the reliability of Air Force personnel who handle, guard and move our most sensitive weapons.

The commander of Air Combat Command also tasked the 12th Air Force commander, Lieutenant General Seip, to review the report and independently assess the culpability of all Air Force members who were involved with the weapons transfer. Should the 12th Air Force commander determine disciplinary or adverse administrative action is appropriate for selected individuals, arrangements will be made to place those individuals under the jurisdiction of the 12th Air Force commander. As the general court-martial convening authority, Lieutenant General Seip has a variety of options at his disposal.

With that said, I'll provide you an explanation of the incident and then I'll take your questions.

First off, a series of procedural breakdowns and human errors led to the loading and transportation of weapons, weapons that should not have been moved, from Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, to Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana. A Barksdale-assigned B-52 was on the ground August 29th at Minot prepared to fly 12 cruise missiles back to Louisiana. In accordance with international treaties, the Air Force was consolidating advanced cruise missiles for eventual elimination.

Let me walk you through the five procedural errors that occurred in conjunction with that mission that facilitated this serious and unprecedented incident.

As you see here, if we'll bring up slide 1, please, on the morning of August 29th, a team of Minot airmen was dispatched to the base weapons storage area to pick up and transport two pylons to a Barksdale B-52 aircraft.

For those of you unfamiliar with the term "pylon," for our purposes today, a pylon is a self-contained package of six cruise missiles that can be quickly mounted to the wing of a B-52.

What set this in motion, our investigation found, is that one of the two pylons for this flight, a tactical ferry mission, had not been properly prepared. Part of Air Combat Command's investigation determined that the reason it was not properly prepared was the fact that a formal scheduling process, for tracking the status of the missiles, had been subverted in favor of an informal process that did not identify this pylon as prepared for the flight.

Okay, so let's talk about what happened on August 29th. On that day, the first procedural error occurred around 8: in the morning, when airmen assigned to the weapons storage area failed to examine all the pylons located in the storage area. The second procedural failure occurred when the crew operating the trailer that was moving the pylons to the aircraft began hooking up while the required pylon inspection was still underway. The third failure occurred when the crew failed to verify the payload before hooking it up to the trailer for transport.

The crew is required to inspect the munitions before departing. They did not do that.

The fourth failure occurred when the Minot munitions control center failed to verify the status of the pylons being loaded at about 9:25 in the morning. The munitions control center failed to assess a database, as required, that would have alerted them that one of the pylons was not properly prepared for transfer. At this point, the wrong weapons, already in transit to the flightline, and several critical safeguard procedures had been disregarded. The Minot munitions handlers then loaded the pylons onto the B-52, and they remained there overnight on a secure flightline.

A fifth failure occurred the next morning, when the Barksdale- assigned B-52 instructor radar navigator neglected to check all missiles loaded for transport, as required.

The instructor radar navigator performed only a spot check, and only on the right pylon, the one that had been properly prepared for transport.

The pylon carrying the wrong weapon was never inspected. Those factors and disregard for procedures collectively contributed to this serious incident.

The B-52 took off at 8:40 on the following day and arrived at Barksdale Air Force Base at 11:23 that very same morning.

At Barksdale, the munitions personnel followed the correct procedures.

They unloaded the weapons between 7: and 8:30 that evening, inspected them and immediately reported the mistake and established appropriate security. Officials at Barksdale then notified the chain of command.

We want to give you also a visual to help understand the sequence of events. On the screen to my left is a slide that depicts the points of failure. Moving clockwise, and starting in the upper right- hand side, you see a standard hangar. This is where the procedural errors began.

The doors opened, our crews entered, and did not perform the required inspection. The truck then pulls up too soon. At this point, inspections still have not been completed.

At the bottom of the slide are images of the actual pylons leaving the hangar. This shows the pylon that should have been inspected and identified as not prepared for transfer.

Also depicted on the slide is a B-52 loaded and prepared for departure.

Again the proper inspections and checklist procedures did not occur.

This was the last opportunity for our airmen to identify the error before the aircraft took off.

Now let me address our response. The Air Force acted swiftly when the incident occurred. Our actions have included: We've conducted an Air Force-wide stockpile inventory and verified no additional discrepancies.

The commander of Air Combat Command, then General Ron Keys, directed this investigation be led by Major General Raaberg.

As I stated, commanders have been relieved. Air Force Secretary Wynne directed nuclear surety inspections for nuclear-capable units with oversight of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

All units inspected to date have received a satisfactory rating, the highest rating possible.

The commander of Air Combat Command decertified the 5th Bomb Wing from specific missions and suspended tactical ferry operations. We ordered a one day stand-down of appropriate Air Force units, and the commander of Air Combat Command directed a one-day stand-down of his entire command.

The secretary of the Air Force and chief of staff sent messages to all airmen, emphasizing the critical importance of discipline, attention to detail and responsibility. Senior Air Force leadership chartered a blue ribbon review, which is examining policies and procedures across all levels of organization, not just in Air Combat Command, but through the entire force.

To conclude, this was an unacceptable error that resulted in an unprecedented stream of procedural failures. We are accountable to Congress and we are accountable to the American people. I can assure everyone we're taking the corrective actions and continuing to examine our policies and our procedures to ensure the integrity of our mission.

From all levels, the Air Force is committed to safely, securely and reliably handling of our nation's weapons.

And with that, I'll take your questions.

Q General, you used the words, I think secured flightline. Does that mean that while the plane sat in Minot overnight, it was secured to the level that it would have been had it been known that nuclear weapons were on it?

GEN. NEWTON: The aircraft when it was at Minot Air Force Base on the 29th and the 30th was in a secure environment because it was on a secure Air Force flightline at Minot Air Force Base. And so it was secure.

Yes?

Q Two-part question. The first -- you mentioned early in your briefing that there's been -- there was an erosion of adherence to the procedures. Were you able to find out why that had

been? Is this something that became so routine that people just sort of flippantly weren't paying attention to the rules?

GEN. NEWTON: This was -- this is a serious error. We've determined through a very thorough and rigorous investigation that it is an isolated incident due to lack of attention to detail, adherence to well-established both Department of Defense and Air Force guidelines, technical orders and procedures. And the fact that this event occurred, we have determined again that it was an isolated incident to a limited number of airmen, both at Barksdale Air Force Base and at Minot Air Force Base.

Q By saying there was an erosion in the adherence to the rules made it seem that there was a gradual decline in attention to these regulations that led to this thing, as opposed to it being sort of a one-off thing.

GEN. NEWTON: Let me couch it this way as well. Again, this being an isolated incident -- but the fact that the lack of attention to detail, the lack of professionalism, the lack of rigor with applying well-founded Air Force checklist procedures and not following those checklist procedures indicate to us from this very thorough and rigorous investigation that it was a -- certainly a lack of application of those checklist procedures, again, for this isolated incident at Minot.

Q Can I ask one (sub ?) question? The -- but to a layman, the issue of having nuclear weapons in the same hangar as conventional weapons seems a bit -- took us, I think -- took me, anyway, a bit aback that they would even be stored in the same place. Is that a common procedure, or are they normally stored in separate places so this kind of mix-up doesn't happen?

GEN. NEWTON: Where the weapons were stored, they were stored in the facilities, as I mentioned, and they were stored within DOD guidelines and Air Force guidelines as well.

Q So it is normal procedure, then, to keep nuclear weapons in the same place as conventional --

GEN. NEWTON: These weapons were stored in the proper -- with proper procedures in the proper locations at the weapons storage area.

Yes, ma'am.

Q I have a number of follow-up questions. First of all, on what Peter was saying, did you have to get some sort of waiver? Was a waiver required to store the warheads and the missiles in the same facility, in the same hangar?

GEN. NEWTON: The weapons were stored in the facilities per DOD guidelines and Air Force guidelines as well. There was -- there was --

Q (Off mike) -- but does it require a waiver to store them together?

GEN. NEWTON: The weapons again, as I've mentioned, were stored in the proper facilities and were within DOD guidelines and Air Force guidelines as well.

Q Is there some reason you can't tell me specifically that -- I'm not understanding, because of my lack of knowledge -- is a waiver required to do that, or is a waiver not required to do that?

GEN. NEWTON: There was no waiver required in this instance because they were stored in a facility, in a weapons storage area in this case, under DOD guidelines and Air Force guidelines.

Q So when was it decided that that was an acceptable procedure? And were the missiles at that point, in that storage at that point in that hangar -- were they fully fueled? Were those missiles actually active missiles?

GEN. NEWTON: These -- to consider them being missiles individually -- there were actually part of a pylon that was considered to be a package of six missiles that are attached to one pylon. And so --

Q Were any of those missiles fueled?

GEN. NEWTON: These missiles were packaged in a way that, again, met Air Force as well as DOD guidelines. And so --

Q Were any fueled?

GEN. NEWTON: They were packaged in the manner that is appropriate for them to be packaged for the mission; in this case, the tactical ferry operation for them to be transferred from --

Q Was there any fuel in those --

GEN. NEWTON: -- they were transferred from, again, from Minot down to Barksdale.

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. NEWTON: I'd rather not get into those technical details, but just to let you know that they were prepared for the tactical ferry operation, and they were also within the DOD and Air Force guidelines.

Q Can you tell us, to go back to Pauline's question, at what point in all of this were these warheads in a position that was something less secure than they would have been if they had been recognized at the time to be special weapons?

GEN. NEWTON: These weapons were never out of the hands of America's airmen. They were always secure and they were, again, they were again under the security and control of airmen at all times.

Q (Off mike) -- position of less security than they would have been had they been understood to be nuclear warheads?

GEN. NEWTON: These weapons were always secure at all times.

Yes.

Q Can you say how many individuals have been disciplined so far?

GEN. NEWTON: I referred to it in my earlier remarks, that the commander at Minot Air Force Base -- the 5th Bomb Wing commander and the Maintenance Group commander were relieved of command, along with the 2nd Operations Group commander at Barksdale Air Force Base, were relieved of command. And so there are a number of other individuals who have been relieved of their duties as well, but I'd just like to leave it at that, if I may.

Q Is it possible that -- do you foresee criminal prosecutions?

GEN. NEWTON: I'd rather not go into any type of Uniform Code of Military Justice issues. But as I -- I'll stay in my remarks that the commander of Air Combat Command, General Corley, has provided convening authority to the 12th Air Force commander, General Seip.

Q And one last question if I might, just as you look back on this incident, is it safe, again in lay terms, to characterize it as kind of a trainwreck in the sense that once the initial error was made of loading real weapons instead of dummy weapons, the other errors sort of fell into place behind that? Is that really what happened here?

GEN. NEWTON: How I would characterize it is I would go back to the point that this is an isolated incident, in the fact that there are a number of procedural errors that occurred. There are a number of errors that occurred by airmen who should have been following DOD and Air Force guidelines, technical order procedures and policies and so forth. The fact that they did not follow these procedures, the fact that they did not follow these guidelines for technical order -- simple checklist, for instance, leads us to believe that -- and through this very thorough investigation, we determined that those policies and those guidelines and those tech order procedures and checklists remain sound. It's the fact that our airmen did not follow those checklist procedures.

Q Why didn't they follow it? What have you learned about why they didn't follow it? How did this happen, is what I'm asking you.

GEN. NEWTON: It is a -- again, the investigation will lead you to the point that these airmen again lacked an attention to detail. It was a lack of effective supervision, a lack of effective leadership, and the fact that they were not following nor did they adhere to these very strict checklist guidelines procedures.

Q Why were they --

Q I'm sorry. Can I just ask you a question? I don't think we're getting to the heart of this. When you asked them, "Why did not you follow these procedures," what was their answer?

GEN. NEWTON: The reason they didn't follow these procedures, as we've discovered, is again to their lack of a attention to detail. It was due to the fact that they -- for a variety of reasons: they were passive in terms of how they should have been following these checklist procedures; the fact that they did not apply the rigor, the same standards that we ask of all our airmen to follow through, with certain tech order procedures and checklists. It also goes back to not following a formal scheduling process, particularly in the weapons storage area.

Q I understand that, but my question is, I mean, did you ask them were they aware of these procedures? And when you said, "Why did you not follow them," what was their response?

GEN. NEWTON: Yes. They were aware of the checklist procedures. They were aware of the technical order procedures. We have gone back and taken a look at how they were trained and also the qualifications. And so these airmen had been trained. They had been following at some period of time in their careers these checklist procedures and tech order procedures. And again, through their lack of professionalism and attention to detail -- and again, leadership and supervision played a role in this as well.

Yeah?

Q But again, did they say, "I was too busy, I had too much work, I didn't care, I didn't think those procedures were important"? What did they say?

GEN. NEWTON: They -- again, it was one where they -- based on, again, their lack of attention to detail in the case of following a variety of checklist procedures and -- is where the failure occurred.

Q Did you find substance abuse with any case -- (off mike)?

GEN. NEWTON: The investigation doesn't lead us to any of that -- that issue at all.

Yes, sir?

Q You narrated a series of mistakes by which these various airmen failed to discover that this one pylon had inappropriate weapons. Was there a prior mistake made in preparing this pylon in the first place? In other words, there were two pylons.

GEN. NEWTON: Right.

Q One of them had inappropriate weapons. Through this series of errors, it wasn't noticed. But how did that pylon with inappropriate weapons get placed in there and identified to go on this B-52 in the first place? Didn't somebody make a mistake before all this?

GEN. NEWTON: The -- yes. The root cause of what kicked off this incident was a breakdown in formal scheduling processes or the lack of formal scheduling process within the munitions complex. It became apparent that the fact that there was no formal scheduling process, the fact that the day-to-day mission out in the weapons storage area, under the munitions control, was lackadaisical -- it again lacked the attention to detail. It lacked a formal process to the point where it became an informal process. And again, this is where the breakdown of attention to detail, which then led to the procedural errors, had the event occur.

Q But there were two pylons, six missiles each. Both pylons are supposed to contain missiles without nuclear -- any nuclear warheads. One of them contained six missiles with nuclear warheads. How did that pylon with nuclear warheads get identified in the first place as -- to be transported from --

GEN. NEWTON: In this case, we're talking about the left pylon. The left pylon -- again, why it arrived in the condition that it was, was -- it started with that simple breakdown in -- and the lack of a formal scheduling process within the weapons storage area. And then it processes over into airmen who are not doing their job, following well-established checklist procedures and proper procedures.

Yes. Yes.

Q (Off mike) -- the warheads and --

GEN. NEWTON: I'm sorry?

Q Was some supposed to remove the warheads from those six missiles and failed to do that?

GEN. NEWTON: Airmen did not do their job following proper procedures and checklists; that would have prevented this incident from occurring.

Q Is that a yes or --

GEN. NEWTON: That's a yes.

Q (Laughs.)

Q You mentioned the -- what's happening to the top leaders. Can you tell us what has happened to the individual -- the airmen involved? How many were actually involved in this at both bases? Are they still being given -- do they still have these jobs that they did before this nuclear weapons accident?

GEN. NEWTON: Right now the 5th Bomb Wing is decertified from conducting its wartime missions. And so we have gone through -- as I mentioned in my remarks, we have decertified a number of individuals from performing their duties day to day, both at Minot Air Force Base and at Barksdale Air Force Base.

Q Do you have a breakdown of how many individuals that actually is?

GEN. NEWTON: I'd have a rough number for you. It's several many -- it's certainly less than a hundred, but that's a ballpark number. And so --

(Cross talk.)

GEN. NEWTON: I don't have the specific numbers, but it's less than a hundred.

Q (Off mike) -- people that were --

Q Will you take that question, sir?

GEN. NEWTON: Let me do this. Let me take that question, and we'll get back to you as soon as we get more of those details. Go ahead.

Q (Off mike) -- what's going to happen --

Q (Off mike) -- I mean, the Air Force has to know how many. Can you take that question?

GEN. NEWTON: (Inaudible.)

Q (Off mike) -- as far as the involvement of the DOD Inspector General's Office -- are they conducting their own separate investigation of the incident? And if this was a(n) isolated incident and just kind of a situation where processes were overlooked, why the blue-ribbon, I guess, commission or group to relook at the Air Force procedures overall, if it wasn't a problem of the actual procedures (that ?) took place?

GEN. NEWTON: I don't have any knowledge of the Department of Defense inspector general -- whether or not they have kicked off a formal investigation. I'm sure we can, you know, talk to DOD or we can perhaps get back to you on that. But I do know that the commander-directed investigation, as thorough and as rigorous as it was -- it lasted over last [six] weeks. When I first met with our chief of staff in the early morning of the 31st of August and we discussed this, the first thing -- one of the first things he mentioned was the fact -- the need to do a very thorough commander-directed investigation led by a two-star general.

Among the many topics we had that morning -- but the second thing he also mentioned was he wanted a very thorough, broader review of this incident, and the fact that -- not only a broader review that would go beyond just Air Combat Command but through the entire United States Air Force. And so he also, at that point, wanted an outside look. And what we have done as part of our blue-ribbon review that Secretary Wynne referred to has asked the chief of Naval Operations to provide Navy personnel to be part of this overarching blue-ribbon review that will look beyond just Air Combat Command but throughout the entire Air Force.

And so that's -- that is -- as we look forward, as the commander- directed investigation report is now complete -- as we look forward, we will have this blue-ribbon review that will be overarching.

Secretary Wynne mentioned that General Peyer is leading that blue-ribbon review. She will report out to our chief of staff by on or about 15 January.

Yes?

Q You said three were relieved of duty, but then several more. Why the reluctance to give us the total number of how many were relieved of duty?

GEN. NEWTON: Well, I wanted to underscore the fact that General Corley, the commander of Air Combat Command, has relieved senior leaders in this case; as I mentioned, the commander of the 5th Bomb Wing and 5th Maintenance Group commander at Minot, as the well as the 2nd Operations Group commander. I also wanted to underscore the fact that not only is it with senior leaders; there are other who are involved that are lieutenant-colonel and below, as I mentioned.

The other fact is that we are -- General Corley has provided convening authority for UCMJ actions to 12th Air Force. And so that aspect of this incident will then move on into the UCMJ (realm ?). And I'd just like to leave it at that, please.

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. NEWTON: Three colonels in this case that I mentioned were relieved of duty.

Yes?

Q You said that they were -- the weapons were never left unsecured, and I -- we understand that there was some level of security at all times. But I guess what we need to clarify is, what is the difference between the level of security within the hangar and outside the hangar where the B-52s spent the night?

GEN. NEWTON: Having been the commander at Minot Air Force Base, I, you know, appreciate the fact that it's a very safe, secure environment at Minot on our flightlines. These weapons, as I mentioned, were never out of the hands of America's airmen, the fact that they were never left unsecured. The level of security that they were afforded kept these weapons safe and secure. Not up to the standards that we would have liked, but the fact that these weapons were never out of the hands of America's airmen and they were secure at all times.

Yes, sir?

Q Minot's got both cruise missiles with and without warheads. Are they stored together? You're talking -- you keep talking about they came out of the hangar. Do you store weapons with nuclear warheads in hangars?

GEN. NEWTON: Our weapons across the Air Force, and specifically at Minot Air Force Base, are stored within DOD standards and policies and guidelines. And so they are safely and securely stored within the -- and the investigation determined that they were stored within all applicable DOD guidelines as Air Force guidelines as well.

Q But nuclear weapons storage areas are different from ammo dumps. Right?

Yes.

Q (Off mike) -- they didn't follow the schedule, the schedule for what? The schedule to have the warhead removed or the schedule to be shipped to Barksdale?

GEN. NEWTON: They did not follow the formal scheduling processes that would allow them to do the proper maintenance and handling of those weapons, not only in preparation for the ferry flight but also to make sure that they were the proper and they were the appropriate weapons to be transferred.

MR. : We have time for one more, please.

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. NEWTON: They did -- not only was the scheduling process broken and not followed -- the fact that they did not follow those checklist guidelines and procedures is -- again this incident occurred because of the number of those errors.

Last question, I'm sorry. Go ahead, I'm sorry. (Cross talk.)

Q Other than removing the nuclear weapons, what needs to be done to properly prepare one of these pylons for transport?

GEN. NEWTON: You go through a number of checklist procedures and -- which will -- if you follow the checklist procedures, it will lead you to the point where you will safely transfer these weapons in an appropriate manner, and the fact that they will be transferred -- again that they were authorized to be transferred in.

Q (Off mike) -- done in hours? Does it take days to do that?

GEN. NEWTON: To process, it goes from weeks to days to hours in this case. And those processes broke down.

Sure.

Q And if I may, if this bomb wing has been decertified from doing these tactical ferry missions, is there another bomb wing that's doing them in the interim? Or have you suspended --

GEN. NEWTON: No, all Air Force tactical ferry missions for these cruise missiles has been suspended. (Cross talk.)

So let me -- can I just leave you with this? This is a serious error that was caused by a breakdown of procedural discipline by airmen. We're accountable and we will assure the American people that the Air Force standards they expect are being met. Our wings at Barksdale and Minot are units with a proud heritage. They've had a history of excellence. And we've made some tough decisions but now, we need to restore the confidence in these units and move ahead. And I rest assured, we will. Thank you.

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