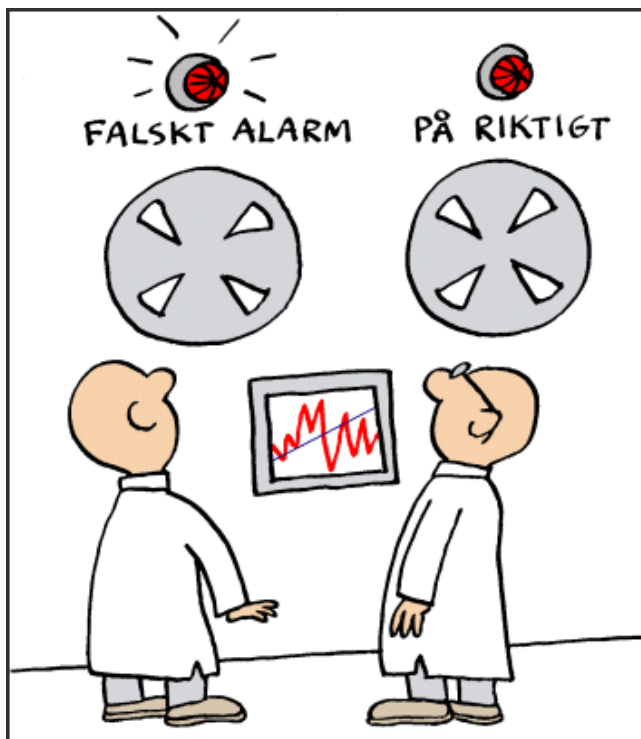


LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Alert levels

During the Cold War, the US and the USSR developed "launch-on-warning" systems to identify and counter an enemy nuclear attack before it could reach its target. Despite the fact that the Cold War ended many years ago, there are still thousands of nuclear weapons on hair trigger alert, ready to be launched within minutes. In October 2007, Chile, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden, and Switzerland presented a resolution to the UN General Assembly on de-alerting nuclear forces.¹ Only three states voted against it: The US, the UK, and France.²

False alarm



On a number of occasions since the invention of nuclear weapons, false alarms have occurred, bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war within minutes.

Early in the morning on November 9th 1979, four American command centres received signals of a full scale Soviet nuclear attack on its way. Within six minutes, massive preparations were made to counter the attack with US nuclear weapons, before someone realized this was a false alarm caused by the accidental running of an exercise tape about a Soviet nuclear attack through the US surveillance system. The telephone "hot line" established in 1963 between the US and the Soviet Union to prevent nuclear war by mistake or miscalculation was not used during these six minutes of panic.

In 1995, Russia was close to ordering a nuclear weapon launch. The Russian warning system received signals about a rocket being fired near the Norwegian coast. Russian military officers interpreted it as a submarine-launched US nuclear missile targeted at Moscow. President Yeltsin, during these few tense minutes, opened his nuclear suitcase containing the codes for launching Russian nuclear weapons. Some five minutes later, the missile - a Norwegian research missile - turned in another direction and the alarm was called off. 35 states, including Russia, had been

informed about the Norwegian research missile, but the information had apparently not reached the people operating the warning system.³

The human factor

In addition to the technical problems that may cause false alarms, there is always the human factor. Just like the control systems of nuclear power plants, the nuclear weapons warning systems have to be monitored around the clock. Many accidents happen during the night, as a result of people being tired and bored.⁴ Mistakes happen easily. We get on the wrong bus, dial the wrong number or forget to call our mom on her birthday. But when the mistake is about dialing the wrong digits in the navigation system of an aircraft or shutting off the wrong monitor of a surveillance system – that is when the consequences can become catastrophic.

A retired Soviet marine officer who worked for many years as the commander of a nuclear-equipped submarine tells his story: *“During our long periods cruising deep in the ocean, often for several weeks, I rarely got more than a few hours of sleep per night. For several days I stayed on the bridge, keeping awake with coffee and vodka. There were times when I was so tired, I found it difficult to see which lights were green and which were red on the instrument panel. And, yes, during this period I and my crew had the capability to launch our missiles with more than a hundred nuclear charges.”*⁵

Between 1975 and 1990, 66,000 U.S. military personnel were permanently removed from duties involving nuclear weapons, because they were judged to have become unreliable. That is an average of 4,100 people per year for a decade and a half. Obviously, human mistakes and miscalculations happen within the nuclear military as well. To err is human, but we have to do everything we can to avoid human errors leading to the launch of nuclear weapons or, in the worst case, to nuclear war by mistake. No human being should be asked to bear the responsibility for the future existence of our planet.⁶

1 <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/N07/549/60/PDF/N0754960.pdf?OpenElement>

2 <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/political/1com/1com07/ga/36.pdf>

3 <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/missileers/falsealarms.html>

4 http://www.slmk.org/main/artiklar/Human_Factor.pdf

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.