

US Nuclear Weapons in the Netherlands: A First Appraisal

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During the Cold War, Dutch units had responsibility for nuclear-capable Honest John rockets that were deployed in West Germany. This is an Honest John on display in the National Military Museum at the site of the former airbase at Soesterberg. (Photo from Wikipedia Commons).

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January 1960 Agreement Led to Nuclear Sharing Arrangements

Public Access to Key Historical Records in Doubt after Dutch Courts Affirm Secrecy Regime for U.S. Nukes

Washington, D.C., January 15, 2021 – The stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe remains a controversial issue on both sides of the Atlantic. One of the less well-known cases involves the Netherlands, which first accepted atomic weapons shortly after the two governments signed a secret stockpile agreement in January 1960. That accord is part of a compilation of declassified documents posted today – most for the first time – by the National Security Archive.

That the U.S. has authorized deployments to numerous NATO states is one of those secrets everybody knows – Dutch former Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers acknowledged the facts of the matter involving his own country in 2013. Nevertheless, the arrangements are an official secret, as is the number of weapons currently in the Netherlands, and obtaining access to the historical record is a major challenge for historians. Recently the Dutch government confirmed its stance when scholar Cees Wiebes went to court to induce the declassification of documents on the origins of the deployments. Wiebes lost his case but in the process raised legitimate questions about excessive secrecy, which he addresses in a sidebar to this E-book.

The main body of today's posting consists of records Wiebes obtained in the course of his research. The materials trace the story of the U.S. deployments from the inception of the nuclear stockpile plan in the late 1950s to their restructuring in the mid-1970s. While only a small piece of the larger history, the documents help provide a clearer picture of a still-controversial matter.

* * *

by Cees Wiebes and William Burr

The controversial deployments of U.S. nuclear weapons in NATO countries had their roots in the policies of the allies that associated with U.S. government plans to deploy the weapons on their territories for use in the event of war. From the beginning, according to documents published today by the National Security Archive, the government of the Netherlands has been a partner in the nuclear weapons enterprise. Since 1960, Washington and the Hague have had an agreement governing the deployments of U.S. nuclear weapons in the Netherlands, one of several documents published here for the first time. Since they began in 1960, the deployments have varied, from Honest John missiles to nuclear bombs for Dutch fighters and nuclear mines for anti-submarine war aircraft. Now, only nuclear bombs are deployed.

The fact of the agreement and the nuclear deployments remains an official secret from the standpoints of both the U.S. and the Dutch governments. Yet, over the years, archives in both countries have released, mostly inadvertently, significant documents that shed light on the interesting history of the Dutch-U.S. nuclear relationship. In the Netherlands, Cees Wiebes tested the secrecy in court proceedings and the courts ruled against him. Horrified by the archival releases and supported by U.S. importuning, the ministries and the courts united to defend the secrecy of the nuclear agreements with Washington and tried to reclassify the documents. Such incidents may reoccur until such time as Washington and its NATO partners develop a more reasonable policy governing disclosure of the history of a truly open secret.

Background

Of the 150 or so U.S. nuclear weapons that are believed to be currently deployed to NATO countries, some of them are stored in the Netherlands, as well as Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Turkey. Today's National Security Archive publication focuses on the case of the

Netherlands using primary sources to detail major phases of the U.S. nuclear weapons deployments in the Netherlands and the Dutch-U.S. nuclear relationship.

When and how did U.S. nuclear weapons arrive in Holland? Whether the U.S. deployed some weapons during the mid-1950s, before the stockpile program began, as it did in the instances of Italy and West Germany, is an unknown. In any event, the first step in the process began with a virtual invitation by Defense Minister Cornelis Staf during a NATO meeting in late 1956 [Document 1]. The arrival of the weapons during and after 1960, however, was a predicate of country-to-country agreements. From 1959 forward, the government of the Netherlands reached several technical agreements with U.S. government agencies, including the Department of Defense, concerning the stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons on its territory. The first one was the 6 May 1959 Dutch-U.S. nuclear cooperation agreement entitled “*Agreement between the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Government of the United States of America for cooperation on the uses of atomic energy for mutual defense purposes.*” It was published officially in the Netherlands. [Document 2]

The May 1959 agreement was broader than the original “*Agreement between the Parties to the North Atlantic Treaty for co-operation regarding atomic information*” signed in Paris on 22 June 1955. The 6 May 1959 agreement contained a secret ‘*technical annex*’ dealing with information that the U.S. would transfer to Dutch military forces and a ‘*security annex*’ detailing security measures. The latter was an annex to a NATO agreement on the security measures that the members states would have to follow to safeguard atomic information.[1]

The basic idea behind the atomic stockpile arrangements was to give European allies such as the Netherlands confidence that nuclear weapons would be immediately available if a military crisis broke out. Accordingly, the stockpile agreements that participating governments signed made that possible. The secret 26 January 1960 technical agreement, signed by Ambassador Philip Young and the Dutch foreign minister, permitted the U.S. to store nuclear weapons in the Netherlands. Article 6 of the agreement stipulated that the Dutch government would be responsible for the external security of these weapons as well as during their transport by road or train in the Netherlands.

The stockpile agreement did not provide for Dutch forces deployed in West Germany to use nuclear weapons stored there. The stationing of a Netherlands Tactical Group in Germany had been negotiated in 1958 as part of a plan to support NATO’s forward strategy if war suddenly broke out. In that event, to make nuclear weapons available to those Dutch units it was necessary to negotiate an additional exchange of notes to provide that support [Document 6].[2]

Another major agreement applied to air dropped weapons. This was in a secret agreement signed 15 February 1960 between the USAF and the Royal Dutch Air Force allowing the USAF to deploy nuclear bombs to Volkel Air Base. The bombs arrived in the Netherlands in April 1960.

Arrival of the Weapons and Delivery Systems

The nuclear delivery systems that the United States provided to the Netherlands and other NATO members were in accordance with alliance military planning and the burden sharing agreements embodied in NATO's force requirements strategy, MC-70. According to a December 1957 NATO communiqué:

“The deployment of these stocks and missiles and arrangements for their use will accordingly be decided in conformity with NATO defence plans and in agreement with the states directly concerned.”

The first nuclear weapon systems in the Netherlands were a battery of Honest John missiles to the Royal Netherlands Army (RNA); they would be on loan within the framework of the Mutual Defense Assistance Program (MDAP). The actual deployments took place during 1959/1960. According to a SHAPE official history, the Netherlands had made a request to SACEUR [Supreme Allied Commander Europe] General Lauris Norstad for a nuclear weapons storage site to support an Honest John unit.[3]

During the early 1960s, nuclearization for the Royal Netherlands Air Force (RНАF) began with plans to make tactical aircraft and their pilots ready for nuclear missions. One squadron with F-84F fighters was tasked for nuclear missions. The fighters could be deployed day or night, but they lacked all weather capability. The F-84s were replaced by two squadrons of F-104G Starfighter, which the U.S. and the Netherlands agreed would have nuclear capabilities.[4]

Concurrently the Royal Netherlands Army readied itself to operate air defense missile systems deployed to West Germany. RNA units first operated the NIKE system and then its replacement NIKE/HERCULES. In addition, during the early 1960s, the Army deployed two units each of the Honest John missiles (each with 4 launchers) and two mixed units of Honest Johns (each with two launchers). Between 1966 and 1967, 28 pieces of M107 were purchased by the Royal Netherlands Army to replace the cannon 155mm-M59 (the “Long Tom”). A further 11 pieces of 203mm howitzer M110 were also acquired for nuclear artillery tasks in 1966 and 1967. Sharing the air defense task with the Army, the RНАF would get 6 NIKE batteries for defense against incoming enemy planes.

The Royal Netherlands Navy would have nuclear missions under the direction of the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT), whose role was written into the January 1960 agreement. The initial plan was to outfit Neptune planes assigned to the aircraft carrier *Karel Doorman* with nuclear depth charges. The nuclear depth charges were originally to be stored at Volkel, but they ended up at RAF St. Mawgan in Cornwall (U.K.). With the phasing out of the *Karel Doorman* in 1963 (sold to Argentina, which used it during the Falkland war), however, that project came to a halt. Nevertheless, detailed agreements with London and Washington would provide for a naval nuclear role. In an exchange of letters in 1965 President Johnson confirmed to U.K. Prime Minister Harold Wilson that the United States would release nuclear weapons to the Neptunes. Search for other instances and synchronize] only after a joint U.S.-U.K. agreement.[5] In keeping with this exchange of letters, the U.S. Navy and the Dutch Navy signed a technical agreement on 14 February 1968. Following that was a Dutch agreement with the British

on 23 July 1970, which covered the use of the 'Special Ammunitions Storage Site' in St. Mawgan. Nuclear depth charges were permanently stored there which could be used by the 6 Dutch Neptunes that would fly from St. Mawgan beginning in 1974.

During the mid-to-late 1960s, budget cuts reduced the number of 8-inch Howitzers for nuclear tasks and lowered the number of Honest Johns to two 2 batteries (each with two launchers). The army also planned to make one unit of 155 mm Howitzers '*nuclear capable*'. Finally, the army made a transition to the NIKE/HERCULES program with a total of 7 squadrons of which 6 had a nuclear capability.

By 1975, the number of nuclear delivery vehicles assigned to the Dutch army remained the same, but nuclear modernization plans were in the works. While plans were underway to replace the Honest John with the Lance missile, the Army had two Honest John units with four launchers each and a battery of 8-inch Howitzers with 8 cannons. The initial plan for Lance was for it to have a nuclear capability but later military planners decided that it would have a conventional role. On the plan to make the 155 mm Howitzers nuclear capable, nothing had happened. The Army, however, had access to atomic demolition munitions (ADMs) under U.S. control and stored in West Germany. Their total number was about 30 of various yields. There was some uneasiness in the Dutch government that the Germans could control these nuclear devices. As for the Air Force, it had two squadrons of Lockheed F-104 Starfighters with a total of 36 fighters, which came into service in 1964.

The Netherlands also purchased the Nike Ajax missile and its successor the NIKE HERCULES for defending against medium high-flying planes. For low-flying targets the smaller Hawk was purchased. Much was delivered within the MDAP program. To manage these weapons, 5 Guided Weapons Groups (GWGs) were established in the Federal Republic of Germany. Two of the GWGs operated the Nikes and the other three had responsibility for the Hawk system.. Each group consisted of four scattered squadrons. The personnel strength of a NIKE group consisted of 1900 troops, of which about 40 percent were conscripts. A Hawk group had a strength of 1500 troops, of which about 30 percent were conscripts.

Nuclear weapons deployments in the Netherlands greatly changed after the Cold War ended. Except for nuclear bombs, the U.S. removed whatever weapons and delivery systems remained. According to a recent study by Hans Kristensen, some 150 bombs are now deployed at six bases in five countries: Aviano and Ghedi airbases in Italy; Incirlik in Turkey; Büchel in Germany, Kleine Brogel AB in Belgium, and Volkel AB in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, there are an estimated 20 B61 bombs. The weapons are earmarked for delivery by Dutch F-16A/Bs of the 1st Fighter Wing and are under custody of the U.S. Air Force 703rd MUNSS. The base has 11 shelters equipped with underground bomb vaults (for a maximum capacity of 44 weapons).[6] Incursions by anti-nuclear activists have raised questions about base security and debate over the need for the deployments continues in both the United States and the Netherlands.[7]

Evidence from the Times

Some of the documentary record confirms the presence of nuclear weapons in the Netherlands during the 1960s and 1970s. In light of growing concern about international terrorism, the U.S. Embassy in the Hague became worried about the security of U.S. nuclear warheads at Volkel. On 1 July 1974, the U.S. ambassador in The Hague, Kingdon Gould, Jr, spoke with Dutch Foreign Minister Max van der Stoep on the “*Retrieval of Nuclear Weapons*.” According to Gould’s top-secret memorandum of conversation, he spoke of the U.S. “desire ... to develop contingency plans in the event that a nuclear device is stolen in the Netherlands or having been stolen elsewhere is moving towards or within Netherlands territory or territorial waters.” Van der Stoep did not have an answer to this delicate question but suggested that the Embassy discuss the matter with the Defense Ministry. [See Document 15]

Further confirmation of the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons on Dutch soil may be found in a memorandum, sent in June 1975 from the chief of the RCAF, Lt. General J. H. Knoop, to the minister of defense. His report provided a comprehensive picture for army, navy, and air force weapons during the period.

As noted earlier, U.S. modernization plans were an important part of U.S. nuclear planning. According to Knoop, the U.S. Air Force had proposed to the Belgian, Italian, German, and Netherlands air force a new generation of nuclear bombs to be provided beginning in early 1977. The USAF found that new weapons were safer, had lower maintenance costs, and had a better aerodynamic shape. The new weapons would have the same ‘*yield range*’ compared to the nukes presently ‘stored in The Netherlands’. Thus, there would be no enlargement of nuclear capabilities but only a routine modernization in the technical and logistical sense.

The two dual-capable squadrons of F-104 Starfighter were to be phased out in 1982 and 1983 and replaced by the F-16 which in principle was nuclear-capable. However, no final decision had been made as regards its nuclear tasks. According to Knoop, the nuclear-armed QRA Starfighters could be airborne in 15 minutes, clear evidence that the weapons were stored at Volkel air base. [See Document 17]

After the End of the Cold War, the U.S. continues to store nuclear bombs at Volkel Air Base but under broader, NATO auspices.[8] The nuclear weapons are stockpiled in the Netherlands is one of those badly kept secrets or open secrets. In 2013, former Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers openly spoke about the deployments in an interview, noting that when he was in the Dutch Air Force in the early 1960’s he had devised a way to inventory U.S. nuclear weapons to ensure their secrecy. Decades later, in the post-Cold War environment, Lubbers saw the weapons as an “an absolutely pointless part of a tradition in military thinking.” The next year, in 2014, anti-nuclear activists made a widely publicized foray into Volkel Airbase, showing the lax security arrangements for the nuclear bombs stored there.

The Challenge of Over-classification

The early history of the atomic stockpile in Europe ought to be in the declassified public record, while keeping details about weapons and related sensitive matters classified. But the rest, even the numbers of weapons in say 1960 or 1999, can be declassified without harm to U.S. or European security. To continue the present state of affairs does not make sense. Admittedly getting NATO, not to mention the U.S. Defense Department, to agree to a new declassification policy would be no easy task, but that does not mean that it should not be discussed.

Certainly, more needs to be learned about the story of the U.S. nuclear presence in the Netherlands and other European countries and its broader diplomatic, military, and socio-political implications although excessive secrecy may hinder the acquisition of more knowledge. Dutch and American military forces provided security for the nuclear weapons storage sites and learned how to use nuclear weapons, while U.S. custodial units had administrative control over the weapons themselves. What exactly that work involved and how orders for nuclear use would have been relayed remain untold and may remain so for many years. The story of Dutch-U.S. diplomatic negotiations over nuclear deployments is another untold story. Finally, the implications of the presence of nuclear weapons on nearby Dutch towns and villages as well as for Dutch political and social movements are issues that historians have begun to address but remain to be fully explored.[9]

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Note: Thanks for assistance from Frank Klaassen, www.thunderstreaks.com; and Dario Fazzi, Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, the Netherlands.

Read the Documents

Document 01

William B. Dunham, Political Officer, U.S. Embassy, the Hague, to Bruce M. Lancaster, Office of Western European Affairs, 15 March 1957, Secret

1957-03-15

Source: Records of the State Department (RG 59), Alpha-Numeric Files of the Swiss-BENELUX Desk, 1951-1963, box 11, N.22. Staf Visits (Defense Minister)

With Dutch Defense Minister Cornelis Staf slated to visit Washington, Dunham wrote to Lancaster about some of the key agenda items. One issue was the plans for supplying the Dutch with “modern weapons” and implementing the NATO atomic stockpile proposal, which were already under discussion with the Dutch. In particular, the Embassy and the Dutch had been discussing Honest John rockets and “conversion kits,” probably to make F-84 fighter-bombers nuclear-capable. Dunham noted that at a NATO meeting in December 1956, Staf had proposed that for dual-use weapons stationed in NATO countries “atomic weapons also be stored there under U.S. control for use by the Dutch and other NATO members should an emergency require.”

Document 02

Agreement between the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Government of the United States of America for Cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defense Purposes,” 6 May 1959.

1959-05-06

Source: *Tractatenblad of the Kingdom of the Netherlands* 1959 Volume No. 3

Under Section 144b of the Atomic Energy Act, Restricted Data could not be shared with allies absent the negotiation of an agreement. The 144B agreement with the Netherlands was reached in May 1959, establishing the groundwork for the atomic stockpile system in the Netherlands. A major highlight of the agreement was the communication of information and the transfer of “non-nuclear parts of atomic weapons systems involving Restricted Data.” Information to be transferred would include defense plans and the use of atomic weapons and nuclear-capable delivery systems. Specifically, the United States would transfer to the Netherlands Government the “non-nuclear parts of atomic weapons systems involving Restricted Data” when it was determined that it was necessary to improve operational readiness and the state of training for Dutch forces.

Training in the use of nuclear weapons would require familiarity with their components, even those parts that would reveal atomic information.

Document 03

Exchange of Notes Between U.S. Vice Counsel John G. Day, and Foreign Minister of the Netherlands J.M.A.H. Luns, with attached agreement, 27 July 1959, unclassified

1959-07-27

Source: RG 59, Office of the Special Assistant to the Secretary for Atomic Energy, Atomic Energy Matters 1948-1962

This exchange of notes brought into force the 144b agreement with the Netherlands that the two governments signed on 6 May 1959.

Document 04

Russell Fessenden, Deputy Director, Office of European Regional Affairs, Department of State, to Ambassador Philip Young, 11 December 1959, with Memorandum for the Record, 7 December 1959, attached, Secret

1959-12-11

Source: Records of Foreign Service Posts, Record Group 84 (RG 84), Records of the Hague Embassy, Classified General Records, 1945-1963

It had taken months to carry out the U.S.-Netherlands atomic cooperation agreement, as Russell Fessenden explained, because of a backlog of work. Before the agreement could be implemented there had to be a “statutory determination that communicating the pertinent Restricted Data to the Dutch would not endanger the common defense and security.” Such a determination would be prepared by the Joint Atomic Information Exchange Group, which would then be cleared by Defense and then the Atomic Energy Commission. Originally, it was thought that the determination on Germany had greater priority but with the delay on the Netherlands, the JAIEG decided to accelerate the timetable. According to Fessenden, the determination would be made within a month, although the holidays could cause a slight delay.

Document 05

Note from U.S. Embassy, 26 January 1960, Secret

1960-01-26

Source: Archives of the Cabinet Office of the Netherlands

As Fessenden had anticipated, the JAEIG moved forward toward a favorable determination for the Netherlands fairly quickly and the two government finalized the stockpile agreement through an exchange of notes in January 1960. Given the NATO mission for the nuclear weapons, both the Hague and Washington agreed that SACEUR and SACLANT [Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic] would designate the location of the stockpiles “in accordance with approved NATO military plans” and the two governments. That SACLANT was involved suggested that naval nuclear weapons, such as anti-submarine weapons, would be involved in the program.

Other issues covered by the agreement were such matters as costs, U.S. custody, the role of “appropriate authority” in weapons release (the U.S. president), the role of U.S. forces for weapons assembly and other matters, provision of external security by Dutch forces, and the division of labor for transporting the weapons. The annex to the note provided for the deployment of U.S. custodial units in the Netherlands.

Document 06

Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Foy D. Kohler to the Secretary of State, "Circular 175: Request for Authority to Negotiate NATO Atomic Stockpile Agreements with the Netherlands," 28 March 1960, Secret

1960-03-28

Source: RG 59, Central Decimal Files, 1960-1963, 611.567/3-2860

The stockpile agreement with the Netherlands only provided for atomic weapons that would be assigned to Dutch forces in country. Separate agreements were necessary for Dutch access to atomic weapons elsewhere in NATO Europe, such as SACEUR's plans for a Dutch NIKE battalion in West Germany. The proposed agreement would be similar to the one being negotiated for French forces in West Germany in that it would also include language about release authority and use in accordance with SACEUR plans. The stockpile agreement that had been negotiated with the Germans made provision for atomic support for third countries.

Document 07

U.S. Embassy The Netherlands Telegram 1531 to Department of State, 31 May 1960, Secret

1960-05-31

Source: RG 59, Central Decimal Files, 1960-1963, 611.5673/5-3160

One aspect of the third-country agreement that was under consideration was the possible deployment of nuclear weapons to Dutch naval forces, probably for anti-submarine warfare purposes. The State Department wanted to make provision for that, apparently through the concept of a "floating" stockpile, but the Embassy saw that as a side issue unless the U.S. envisioned "Dutch personnel on a non-US, non-Dutch vessel." In any event, the January 1960 agreement took into account naval considerations by accepting the authority of the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) to determine stockpile locations. As the Embassy noted, it might be a "stretch" to interpret that as meaning a Dutch ship, but it would be easier to amend the January agreement to make that possible. The Netherlands would probably be amenable to that because SACLANT was included in the agreement at their initiative.

Document 08

"Translation of Written Questions of Mr. Van der Deen (Pacifist Socialist member of the Second Chamber to Minister of Defense S. H. Visser, and Defense Minister Visser's Answers of October 23 Arranged for Reading in

Sequence,” enclosed with U.S. Embassy The Hague Despatch 343, circa late October 1960, Unclassified

1963-10-23

Source: RG 59, Central Decimal Files, 1960-1963

In a series of written questions and answers, Visser confirmed Van Der Deen’s inquiry about the deployment of Honest John rockets in the Netherlands and further acknowledged that they could be fitted with conventional or atomic weapons. Visser would not say whether atomic weapons were stored in the Netherlands but argued that “weapons of this type are necessary and useful for the Netherlands because NATO defense plans are in part based upon arming with tactical nuclear weapons.”

When Van Der Deen questioned whether the deployment of nuclear weapons would make the Netherlands “a direct target In the event of war,” Visser responded that possession of “said weapons” is “the best guarantee to prevent war.” He refused to consider removing the weapons from the Netherlands because “this defense exclusively serves the peace and the security.”

Document 09

Memorandum for the Record by Major H.F. Williams, Executive Assistant to SACEUR, “General Norstad’s Visit to [Volkel Air Force Base, The Netherlands] on 29 March 1961,” 5 April 1961, Secret, excised copy, transcription attached

19-03-1961

Source: Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Lauris Norstad Papers, box 85, Policy File Serie, Atomic Nuclear Policy 1961

With the stockpile agreement in place, by 1961, Volkel Air Base in the Netherlands would become a well-known site for U.S. nuclear weapons storage that enabled the Dutch Air Force to participate in the atomic weapons stockpile plan. With nuclear storage arrangements a new thing in the Netherlands, SACEUR General Lauris Norstad visited Volkel for a briefing. This heavily excised report of the briefing does not mention Volkel or the Netherlands, but the information on the withdrawals sheet at the Eisenhower Library includes those details.[10]

Further confirming the scene of the Norstad visit is the reference near the top of page 2 to Squadron Leader Bosch, who gave a briefing on security arrangements and the arming of nuclear weapons for the F-84s. A distinctly Dutch name, the only Bosch in the Royal Dutch Air Force that can be identified is J.L. Bosch who had become commander of Leeuwarden Air Base in 1960, which was not a nuclear storage site. Yet, because Bosch

was an important figure in the development of the RCAF after World War II it is possible that Air Force leaders brought him to Volkel to give the briefing to Norstad (and the notetaker mistakenly titled him Major).

Some interesting details remain in the record of the briefing. It appears that a fairly rigorous process of command and control over the weapons and their released had been established. Norstad did not mention the ad hoc JCAE group that had visited the nuclear bases and was quite critical of custody arrangements, but he was interested in additional security, such as a “double check on each person issuing a command.” Unless this was done, he warned his audience, in an indirect reference to the JCAE and the White House, “our political masters will do it for us and this might involve the imposition of delays which would render the system ineffective.”

Document 10

Draft USAF-RNLAF Technical Arrangement Concerning Weapons Storage at Soesterberg AIRFIELD: memorandum from Commodore J.W. Thijsen, Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, to Chief MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] et al., 7 March 1963, Ref: Letter USAFE, Office of the Commander-in-Chief, dtd 11 December 1961, with Draft Technical Arrangements Proposal attached, Secret

1963-03-07

Source: Dutch National Archives. Records of the Dutch Air Force, File 2.13.185

Volkel Air Base remained the sole site for U.S. nuclear bombs in the Netherlands, but the possibility of expanding the storage sites to Soesterberg Airfield was under consideration in early 1960. Apparently, consideration of Soesterberg began with a request by the United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE), which the RCAF followed up with a formal proposal. For reasons that remain to be learned, the matter evidently went no further.

Document 11

S/AE [Special Assistant to the Secretary for Atomic Energy and Outer Space] Philip J. Farley [and] EUR [Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs] William R. Tyler to G – [Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs] Mr. Johnson, “Survey of NATO Nuclear Storage Sites in Europe,” 5 April 1962, Secret

1962-04-05

Source: RG 59, Central Decimal Files, 1960-1962, 740.5611.4-562

State Department officials Farley and Tyler briefed U. Alexis Johnson on the ongoing plans by the Defense Department and the Atomic Energy Commission to survey nuclear weapons storage sites in NATO countries and check on the adequacy of custody

arrangements for weapons that would be made available to non-nuclear NATO countries in a military emergency. The Netherlands was one of the NATO countries that would be surveyed, along with Italy, Germany, and Greece.

One of the purposes of the survey was to address the concerns raised by a subcommittee of the congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE) in its major report on nuclear weapons arrangements in NATO Europe. Toward that end, the survey group would include a JCAE staffer, John Conway, who could determine how much progress had been made in following up recommendations made in its report.

It is not clear whether the survey group actually visited the Netherlands because its report focused on the Jupiter missiles in Italy and nuclear weapons arrangements in West Germany. Nevertheless, on page 24 of the report there is a reference to Dutch personnel, probably one of the battalions in West Germany that had trained for the use of Honest John missiles deployed there.

Document 12

J.C. Trippe, Office of the Legal Advisor, Memorandum for the Record, "Proposed Storage of Nuclear ASW Weapons in the U.K. for Dutch Forces," 23 March 1965, Secret

1965-03-23

Source: RG 59

The nuclear stockpile agreement with the British provided for storage of weapons in the U.K. by the U.S. and other NATO countries. At the time, the agreement was being ironed out the negotiators had in mind ASW nuclear weapons to be assigned to the Netherlands. The agreement did not provide for consultation on nuclear use because that was already a subject of previous Anglo-American understandings at the head-of-state level going back to the 1950s. Those understandings did not, however, include "third country" forces that could be stationed in the United Kingdom. The British, therefore, proposed that the consultative arrangements be expanded to do so. That was done later in the 1965, with exchanges of letters between Prime Minister Harold Wilson and President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Document 13

Memorandum of Conversation, "Nuclear Defense Affairs Committee, Nuclear Planning Group," 6 April 1967, Top Secret, excised copy

1967-04-06

Source: MDR request to Defense Department; release by Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel

The Netherlands participated in the first meeting of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), which became the alliance's top-ranking body on nuclear policy. A special NATO committee to share sensitive nuclear information had been proposed by Secretary General Dirk Stikker earlier in the decade and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, along with other senior U.S. officials, believed that a permanent planning group could solve several problems. First, by sharing sensitive information on U.S. nuclear war plans and nuclear weapons effects, it would help educate the NPG's members into the "realities" of nuclear weapons and discourage support for early use of the weapons. Second, it would help meet West Germany's desire for a role in making policy on nuclear matters while avoiding further consideration of "hardware solutions" such as the Multilateral Force. While the Eisenhower administration had kept its European allies in the dark about nuclear weapons, the Kennedy and the Johnson administrations realized that they could not go on that way without causing deep strains within the alliance.[11]

Attending the meeting were the then permanent members—the U.S., Italy, the United Kingdom, and West Germany. Other NATO countries (limited to those participating in integrated military activities) participated on a rotating basis for one year, with Canada, the Netherlands, and Turkey in this group. Minister of Defense Lt. General Willem den Toom led the Dutch delegation.

McNamara led off the meeting with a briefing on the U.S.-Soviet strategic balance that was followed by a presentation on U.S. policy on anti-ballistic missiles. Following that were discussions of nuclear use and tactical weapons in the NATO area and then presentations by the Turks on Atomic Demolition Munitions and by the Germans on arrangements by host countries for nuclear weapons that was premised on Bonn's interest in a greater voice over decisions that had an impact on German interests. During the discussion of McNamara's first briefing den Toom asked a question about plans for the limited use of nuclear weapons, which led into a discussion of possible Soviet responses to U.S. nuclear use.

Document 14

Van Dijn to Arthur Hockaday, NATO, Planning and Policy Division, 8 November 1967, Secret

1967-11-08

Source: Cees Wiebes Personal Collection

Van Dijn informed Hockaday that the Dutch Army's nuclear forces would be organized in Army corps artillery units as of 1 October 1967. The corps would include two Honest John battalions with four launcher each and one battalion of eight-inch Howitzers comprising two batteries with four pieces in each. That would mean that two Honest John battalions would be abolished.

Document 15

**Royal Netherlands Army General Staff, to SACEUR, CINCENT [et al.]
“Reorganization of Nuclear Delivery Units 1 (NL) Corps,” Signed by Lt.
General F. Van der Veen, Chief of the General Staff, 15 December 1967, Most
Secret**

1967-12-15

Source: Netherlands National Archives, Cabinet Office, 2.03.01, Box 6935

This paper includes more detail on the army units with responsibilities for the Honest John and nuclear-capable artillery. The Honest Johns were deployed at Army Camp Steenwijkerwold, while nuclear artillery was deployed at Army camp ‘t Harde.

Document 16

Excerpt on the Netherlands from draft “Compendium of Nuclear Weapons Arrangements,” n.d., to Memorandum from Philip E. Barringer, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs to Colonel Haskin et al., 8 October 1968, enclosing memorandum to Barringer from W. J. Lehman, Department of State Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, 8 October 1968, Top Secret, Excised copy

1969-10-08

Source: Mandatory declassification review released by Department of Defense

In 1968, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Morton Halperin tasked officials in his bureau to prepare a comprehensive study of the arrangements that the United States had with governments around the world concerning nuclear weapons deployments and transit, including ship visits and overhead flights. The compendium was massively sanitized with names of countries and related details excised, but it was organized alphabetically making it not too difficult to find clues that could identify specific countries.

The section on the Netherlands is identifiable, not least because it includes the date 26 January 1960 for the formal exchange of notes between the Hague and Washington for the stockpiling of nuclear weapons in the Netherlands. It also includes other salient points, such as the fact that in December 1967 the U.S. began sharing data on the types, numbers, yields, and locations of nuclear weapons deployed at various bases in the Netherlands. The latter would have included the U.S. bases at Havelterberg and ‘t Harde along with the Dutch base at Volkel. Such disclosures McNamara had promised earlier in the year, at the Nuclear Planning Group meeting in April 1967.

Document 17

Memorandum of Conversation between Foreign Minister Max van der Stoel and Ambassador Kingdon Gould Jr., “Retrieval of Nuclear Weapons,” 1 July 1974, Top Secret

1974-07-01

Source: RG 59, Records Relating to the Netherlands, 1965-1975, box 1, DEF 2 General

With terrorism becoming a greater concern, U.S. senior officials worried a bit about the security of the U.S. nuclear weapons that had been stockpiled in the Netherlands and other NATO countries. Meeting with the Dutch foreign minister, Gould spoke of the need for contingency plans in the event a nuclear weapon was stolen in the Netherlands, or, having been stolen elsewhere, was heading in the direction of the Netherlands. Van Der Stoel agreed on the need for planning as well as holding the matter very closely. The best person to bring in was van der Valk, head of the Foreign Ministry’s NATO section. Gould suggested that van der Valk get in touch with Deputy Chief of Mission Charles Tanguy.

Document 18

Chief of the RNAF, Lt. General J.H. Knoop to the Dutch ministry of Defense, No. 75-085/7419, 23 June 1975 [Translation Attached]

1975-06-23

Source: Cees Wiebes personal collection

With U.S. plans to modernize theater nuclear weapons in the works, General Knoop informed the defense minister of a U.S. Air Force proposal to the Belgian, Italian, German, and Netherlands air forces to replace nuclear bombs with a new type in 1977. In paragraph 4, Knoop stated that the new weapon would have the same explosive yield as the ones presently stored in the Netherlands.

Document 19

Memorandum from the Dutch JCS, drafted by JCS Chairman Lt. General A. J. W. Wijting, for the Minister of Defense, No. 75-307/14723, 12 December 1975, Secret, in Dutch language, with translation of portions of the appendix attached

1975-12-12

Source: Cees Wiebes personal collection

Dutch Minister of Defense Henk Vredeling (Labour party) wanted to know more about U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in the Netherlands. He forwarded his request to the Dutch Combined Chiefs of Staff. The official drafter of the memorandum to the minister

was Lt. General A.J.W. Wijting who presented his overview to the minister on 11 December 1975 in a lengthy memorandum of more than 30 pages.

Wijting's overview included a short historical sketch of the nuclear weapons developments, a numerical summary of all of these weapons and aspects of future developments in this field. It sketched out developments regarding the stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons on Dutch soil, with a brief factual account of the origins of the weapons stockpile; a numerical overview of the stockpile; and aspects relating to its future development. The crucial decision was made in 1957. Wijting portrayed 1957-1959 as the start-up period and 1959-1975 as the deployment phase.

In a separate appendix Wijting presented an overview of the nuclear activities of the Netherlands Armed Forces within the framework of the alliance, broken down by sections on the Royal Navy, Honest John, 155 mm. howitzer, the Royal Netherlands Air Force, and QRA. Most of the appendix was on "Future developments and possible problems", where Wijting presented a wide tour d'horizon regarding developments in the different elements of the Netherlands armed forces. A translation of the part of the annex is attached to the end of the Wijting report.

Document 20

U.S. Embassy memorandum, No. 86/017, 28 April 2017, attached to letter from E.C. Pietermaat, 1 May 2017

2017-04-28

Source: Cees Wiebes personal collection

With this memorandum, sent to Wiebes by a government lawyer, the U.S. government weighed in on the case of whether documents he requested under Dutch FOIA could be declassified. The essence of their position was that the presence of nuclear weapons in "specific foreign locations was a matter for which the U.S. has been following a policy of "neither confirming nor denying." Moreover, the Atomic Energy Act and national security information regulations control the release of such information. The same types of rules and procedures govern Dutch official access to nuclear weapons information, which is also regulated by NATO policy. Moreover, "past [archival] releases that were not properly authorized do not affect the classification level of the information, nor do they serve as precedent for continued public dissemination."

Notes

[1]. Dutch National Archives, Cabinet Office, 2.03.01, Box 6935, Luns to the Prime Minister, 4 May 1964.

[2]. *Supreme Allied Powers Europe History 1958* SHAPE 58/67, at 32-32.

[3]. *Supreme Allied Powers Europe History 1958* SHAPE 58/67, at page 71.

[4]. Nils Ørvik, editor, *Semialignment and Western Security* (London: Routledge, 1986), 156.

[5]. NA, London, DEFE24/691, E 28, Top secret, no date.

[6]. For a major study, see Hans M. Kristensen, *U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels, and War Planning* (Washington, D.C., Natural Resources Defense Council, 2005). For a recent update see Kristensen, U.S. *Nuclear Weapons in Europe*, Federation of American Scientists, 1 November 2019. See also, Kristensen, “Nukes in Europe: Secrecy Under Siege,” *Federation of American Scientists*, 13 June 2013.

[7]. Jon Wolfsthal, “America Should Welcome a Discussion about NATO Nuclear Strategy,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 29 June 2020.

[8]. Kjølsv Egeland, “Spreading the Burden: How NATO Became a ‘Nuclear’ Alliance,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 31 (2020): 143-167.

[9]. On issues during the period of the Euromissile crisis, see, for example, Giles Scott-Smith, “The Netherlands between East and West: Dutch Politics, Dual Track, and Cruise Missiles,” in F. Bozo et al., eds, *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), and various publications by Ruud van Dijk, including *Prelude to the Euromissile Crisis: The Neutron Bomb Affair, the Netherlands, and the “Defeat of the Strangeloves,” 1977-1978*, Nuclear Proliferation International History Project Working Paper No. 8 (2015). Dario Fazzi with the Roosevelt Institute is working on a larger study of the U.S. military presence in the Netherlands. See “Embodying the American Century: The Long-Lasting U.S. Military Presence in Europe and the Case of Schinnen,” *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* (2019, No. 9): 653-672l

[10]. This is confirmed in Timothy J. Botti, *Ace in the Hole: Why the U.S. Did Not Use Nuclear Weapons in the Cold War, 1945 to 1965* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996, at 274, note 12.

[11]. For a helpful recent overview of the NPG’s origins, see Timothy Andrews Sayle, “A Nuclear Education: The Origins of NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, forthcoming. See also a study by State Department intelligence, Thomas L. Hughes to the Acting Secretary, “The Special Committee: Can It Satisfy European Aspirations,” REU-66, 22 September 1966, available on the Digital National Security Archive.

From left column

Court Battle in the Netherlands

by Cees Wiebes

One of the compilers of this publication, Dr. Cees Wiebes, had his own personal experience with the secrecy regime that blankets nuclear deployments in the Netherlands. On 3 April 2015 he filed a Freedom of Information Act (FIOA) request with the Netherlands Ministry of Defense (MoD). His request was for copies of historical documents from the Ministry's archives relating to technical agreements with the United State government or the U.S. Department of Defense or other official U.S. bodies concerning the stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons on Dutch territory dating from the 1960s. The Ministry rejected the request after long internal deliberations and consultations with the office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In May 2017 after his initial FOIA request was rejected, Wiebes took his case to the lower court in Amsterdam. The MoD was represented by the Country Counsellor and nine advisers. Wiebes represented himself. The judges made clear from the start that the Dutch FOIA was not applicable to NATO documents. Wiebes argued that he was not asking for NATO documents. He was asking for Dutch official documents dealing with internal deliberations between three ministries (MoD, Foreign Affairs and the Cabinet Office). He requested official papers dealing with bilateral negotiations by the Dutch government with the U.S. government leading up to the treaties for storage of nuclear weapons on Dutch soil. In that case the Dutch FOIA was absolutely fully applicable.

The lower court ignored Wiebes' argument. The judges concluded that in this case they were solely dealing with NATO documents. But how could they know? As a matter of fact, they did not take the opportunity to inspect the relevant documents themselves and simply embraced the statement by the government. In the archives of the MoD, Cabinet Office and Foreign Office Dutch official documents can be found that do not have a NATO classification. By ignoring Wiebes's argument, the judges blatantly violated the law, which stipulates that the Lower Court must inspect the documents themselves. The judges also pointed to earlier verdicts by the Council of State, the highest appeals court in The Netherlands, regarding the release of NATO documents. These earlier verdicts were all negative: no release of NATO materials.

Wiebes argued that those earlier verdicts were irrelevant because those older FOIA requests were completely different cases. The case of Wiebes was unique and therefore needed a unique approach, which the lower court did not grant him. The judges also stated that it was not appropriate or necessary for the MoD to forward the original FOIA request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Cabinet Office because the Dutch FOIA was not applicable. They were flat wrong in this stance: the Dutch FOIA was fully applicable because Wiebes was asking for official internal deliberations, such as discussions with officials from other ministries. The MoD was obliged by law to forward his request to the other ministries but they did not. The MoD should have consulted NATO as to whether relevant documents in this matter could be declassified. However, the MoD did not. Finally, the judges of the Lower Court unquestioningly embraced the statement of the MoD that all documents which Wiebes found in the Dutch National Archives were released by a sloppy archivist who declassified the documents by mistake.

At the Council of State, the highest appeals court in the Netherlands, the battle continued. The U.S. Embassy delivered a strongly worded memorandum to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declaring that the released archival documents about nuclear weapons deployments contravened both U.S. and NATO regulations as well as agreements with the Netherlands. The Foreign Ministry had probably alerted the Embassy. At the same time State Department officials were calling colleagues and friends of Wiebes in Washington D.C. to make inquiries. They wanted to know what Wiebes was up to and what documents he had found. Most friends flatly refused to cooperate.

At the Council of State in July 2018 the Country Counsellor plus 11 advisers stuck to the position that the government could “neither confirm nor deny” the existence of Dutch-USA treaties about the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in the Netherlands. They did so even though during the proceedings Wiebes provided copies of relevant Dutch-U.S. agreements to the Council of State judges. The Country Counsellor even claimed the concept of her plea was leaked to Wiebes, which was not true. The latest batch of documents Wiebes had mailed to the court shocked the counselor. Where did Wiebes find these documents? His answer: in the Dutch National Archives around the corner. All three departments involved immediately started a thorough search in the National Archives for these documents and treaties.

Wiebes was unwilling to disclose the exact location but in the end government officials removed some documents from the National Archives. This was to no avail because Wiebes had already copied them. Dutch officials asked the U.S. Embassy in the Hague whether the nuclear agreements could be declassified. The answer was again a flat no. Also, NATO was opposed to a release. Wiebes, assisted by a former advisor of the Dutch Cabinet, pleaded again for the release of the materials but in the end to no avail. The Council of State tacitly held to the U.S. position that inadvertent or accidental release of information about the U.S. nuclear presence did not change the officially secret status of the information.

Wiebes’ experience was somewhat Kafkaesque but the real problem is the policy. As long as important details of the history of the U.S. nuclear presence in Western Europe are classified, archival releases, inadvertent or otherwise, may conflict with high-level policy. [A] Plainly, the Dutch archivists did not know what the policy was or had poor instructions from their supervisors. The information collected from the Dutch archives was useful for historians because they know more than they would have otherwise about an important issue. Nevertheless, the policy should be questioned, especially when it concerns an open secret.

Note

[A]. Accidental releases of information the authorities believe to be classified are not uncommon. The most notorious case in the United States was the “reclassification” scandal earlier this century. See Matthew M. Aid, ed., “Declassification in Reverse: The

U.S. Intelligence Community's Secret Historical Document Reclassification Program,” National Security Archiver Electronic Briefing Book 179, 7 February 2006, and various follow-up postings.