MISSILE TAKES WRONG TURN AT DU ... 12/11/97

Salt Lake Tribune

Types: Nation-World

Published: 12/11/97

Page: A1

Keywords: Military; UT; Weapons; Accidents General

Caption: Jump pg A10: Steve Baker/The Salt Lake Tribune graphic: missile Runs Amok (map)

Missile Takes Wrong Turn At Dugway; Accident Wrecks Controls For Japanese Telescopes; Missile Wrecks Trailers In Western Utah

Byline: BY JOHN HEILPRIN and LEE SIEGEL THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

An Air Force cruise missile flew out of control and crashed during a test Wednesday, wrecking two unoccupied trailers containing computers that control Japanese cosmic-ray telescopes at the Army's Dugway Proving Ground.

``Both of them [trailers] were essentially destroyed or received extensive damage as a result of the impact," said Lt. James Wilson, spokesman for the 388th Fighter Wing at Hill Air Force Base, which operates the Utah Test and Training Range at Dugway.

He said there were no injuries.

The 20-foot-long advanced cruise missile was launched from a B-52 bomber that had taken off from Minot Air Force Base, N.D., Wilson said. After failing to make a turn as planned over Dugway, the missile crash-landed at 2:46 p.m. in a remote area two miles from its intended target. Wilson said the missile's payload was an unarmed dummy warhead.

Air Force officials weren't immediately sure if the missile hit the two trailers or simply wrecked them by crashing nearby, Wilson said.

``We've already begun our investigation to figure out what went wrong with this test, and obviously we'll use that to prevent a future mishap," he said.

Hill spokesman Bill Orndorff said the trailers were ``leased to the University of Tokyo, and the computers inside were their equipment."

Pierre Sokolsky, a University of Utah physicist, said seven Japanese telescopes, which operate only at night, are located on the southwest edge of the Cedar Mountains, approximately 18 miles northwest of base facilities at English Village.

The missile ``was activated and tumbled and lost control" but did not damage the telescopes near the trailers, said Richard Koehn, vice president for research at the U., which helps run the Japanese project.

``Does the Air Force have a means of compensating us for our losses?" Koehn wondered.

Cruise missiles can be fired from ships, ground launchers or planes. They are

computer-controlled and follow land contours to avoid detection.
Sokolsky said U. physicists had been unable by Wednesday night to locate Japanese physicists who run the telescopes, so they ``are at the moment unaware that this transpired."
The accident ``is certainly a setback" for the Japanese cosmic-ray project, said Craig Taylor, physics chairman at the U.
He said the computers are ``the brains for running the telescopes, and they [Japanese scientists] will have to reconstitute the computers that were lost in order to get the system up and running again."
The Japanese project is one of three existing or planned cosmic-ray observatories in Utah.
The U.'s Fly's Eye cosmic-ray observatory was built at Dugway in the early 1980s and is undergoing a $10 million upgrade. The seven Japanese telescopes at Dugway initially were meant to be prototypes for a $50 million set of 100 telescopes named the Telescope Array. A third cosmic-ray observatory, the $50 million Pierre Auger Project, has been proposed in central Utah's Millard County.
But funding problems in the United States and Japan have prompted physicists to consider merging Japan's Telescope Array and a proposed second upgrade to the Fly's Eye into a single project named the Snake Array, which would make observations jointly with the Auger Project.
The Snake Array would include sets of cosmic-ray telescopes on 11 hills stretching 140 miles in a snake-like path from Dugway south to Millard County.
Sokolsky said the Snake Array would not be built for several years, so the mishap's implications for the project remain uncertain.
However, ``this clearly shows that accidents do happen out there," he said. ``We'll have to evaluate what that means long-term and make sure the safety of life and limb is preserved."
All three projects are aimed at finding the mysterious source of ultrahigh-energy cosmic rays, which bombard Earth and are the most energetic particles in the universe. A single subatomic cosmic-ray particle carries the force of a fast-pitched baseball. In 1991, the Fly's Eye detected the highest-energy cosmic ray discovered to date.
Scientists believe ultrahigh-energy cosmic rays might be generated by supermassive black holes, the centers of active galaxies, the mysterious ``dark matter" that may make up much of the universe, or perhaps the breakdown of theorized ``cosmic strings" left over from the birth of the universe.