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US air force documents reveal 'rot' in culture of nuclear weapons officers

Launch officers barely passed inspection at North Dakota base as evidence grows of cheating and 'unprofessional' behaviour

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Associated Press in Washington
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The launch key mechanism at the deactivated Delta Nine Launch Facility near Wall, South Dakota. Photograph: Anonymous/AP

Failings exposed last spring at a US nuclear missile base, reflecting what one officer called "rot" in the ranks, were [worse than originally reported](#), according

On the Guardian today

to air force documents obtained by the Associated Press.

Airmen responsible for missile operations at Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, passed an inspection in March 2013 with a “marginal” rating, the equivalent of a “D” in school. But it now turns out that even that was only because of good marks received by support staff like cooks and facilities managers, as well as a highly rated training program. Launch officers, or missileers, entrusted with the keys to the missiles did poorly and, on their own, would have flunked, the records show.

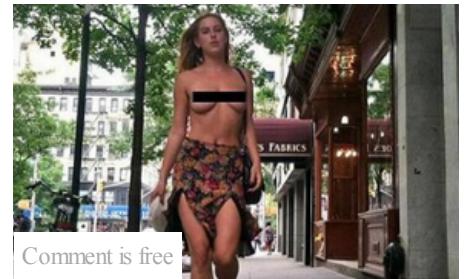
“Missileer technical proficiency substandard,” one briefing slide says. “Remainder [of missile operations team] raised grade to marginal.”

The documents also hint at an [exam-cheating problem](#) in the making among launch crews at Minot, almost a full year before [allegations of widespread cheating](#) erupted [this January](#) at a companion nuclear base in Montana.

An official inquiry into the troubled inspection of the 91st Missile Wing at Minot in March 2013 concluded that one root cause was poor use of routine testing and other means of measuring the proficiency of launch crews in their assigned tasks. For example, commanders at Minot did not ensure that monthly written tests were supervised. The analysis also said Minot senior leaders failed to foster a [“culture of accountability”](#).

In a more direct hint at fudging on exams, one document said, “‘Group testing’ was viewed as ‘taking care of each other’,” while adding that the missileers felt pressure to score 100% on every test. Those are echoes of explanations air force leaders have recounted from launch officers in the aftermath of the cheating scandal that surfaced in early January at the 341st Missile Wing at Malmstrom Air Force Base, in Montana. At least 92 officers at Malmstrom have been removed from launch duty for allegedly cheating or tolerating cheating by others, pending an investigation whose results may be released by the end of this month.

The allegation at Malmstrom is that information on “emergency war orders” exams, which test how a launch crew would handle classified messages related to missile targeting and launch, was shared in advance among launch officers. It’s not clear whether this or other forms of cheating have taken place at the air



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force's two other ICBM bases, but numerous former missileers have said in recent weeks that cheating does occur.



The inside of the deactivated Delta Nine Launch Facility. Photograph: Anonymous/AP

The air force operates a total of 450 Minuteman 3 nuclear missiles, divided evenly among the three bases.

An ICBM base has many interconnected pieces, including security forces that provide protection for the missiles and for the underground launch control centers, as well as commanders and others who work from a headquarters base. But at the mission's core are the missileers and their mastery of "emergency war orders," the secret messages that would authorize a launch. They are supported in the missile field by personnel known as facility managers, who run above-ground support buildings where security forces and others sleep and where cooks prepare meals for the full team.

The air force initially called the overall March inspection outcome at Minot a "success", reflecting the fact that the 91st Missile Wing as a whole was rated "satisfactory". But after the Associated Press learned in May about the "marginal" performance in the missile operations sector of the inspection, the service disclosed that 19 officers had been forced to surrender their launch authority in April because of performance and attitude problems. That was an unprecedented mass sidelining of launch control officers, reflecting what the 91st's deputy operations commander at the time, Lt Col Jay Folds, called "rot" in the force.

Until now, however, it was not publicly known that of 11 crews tested on a launch simulator for the inspection, three were rated Q3, or "unqualified", which the air force defines as demonstrating "an unacceptable level



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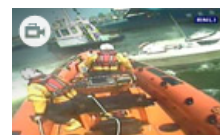
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of safety, performance or knowledge". Five of the 11 earned a top rating and three got a second-tier rating.

The Minot crews performed much better in a September reassessment. Eleven of 12 launch crews received top qualification ratings, although one was rated unqualified with "one critical and one major error". In back-to-back inspections this January, the 91st as a whole was given outstanding marks.

The newly available air force documents were released to a private group in Philadelphia called Speaking Truth to Power after the group filed a lawsuit asserting that US Strategic Command, which oversees all US nuclear forces, had not provided documents requested under the Freedom of Information Act. Speaking Truth to Power, headed by lawyer Jules Zacher, advocates for the elimination of nuclear weapons. He shared the documents with the AP.

Problems inside the ICBM force, many of them first reported by the AP, prompted Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in January to order two reviews. A Pentagon team is seeking to define and fix the trouble, and an outside group is undertaking a broader assessment of nuclear weapons operations. Hagel has said failures in this most sensitive of military missions threaten to erode public trust.

Madelyn Creedon, co-leader of the internal review, was at Vandenberg Air Force Base, in California, on Thursday to review how the air force's ICBM launch crew training program is operated. All launch crews are required to train at Vandenberg before being certified and assigned to one of the three operational ICBM bases.

One newly released document said the Minot wing in North Dakota had shown signs of weakness much earlier. In an April-May 2010 "combat capability evaluation," two of 13 launch crews tested on the use of a launch simulator were deemed "unqualified." Eight rated "highly qualified" and three "qualified." By comparison, of 32 crews who underwent the same evaluation at the two other ICBM bases in 2011, 31 were rated either highly qualified or qualified and only one unqualified.

On routine written tests, the Minot group did exceptionally well until the spring of 2013. In assessing the problems at Minot, the air force produced an analysis of test data that showed that in the two years prior to the March 2013 inspection, 87% of all tests



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resulted in perfect scores. In the three months following the weak inspection, 46% of test scores were perfect, including just 20% in May.

It also found that errors on monthly written tests and errors on launch control simulators soared after the March inspection. In the 10 months of written tests prior to its inspection, the Minot missileers had a total of 162 “job performance requirement” errors, which are mistakes on what the air force considers essential tasks. In the three months following the inspection the total doubled, to 321 errors, according to the data analysis.

Air Force officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

After visiting all three ICBM bases days after the Malmstrom cheating scandal was disclosed, air force secretary Deborah Lee James said she was troubled to hear that missileers “felt driven to score 100% all the time” because commanders use scores as the main, or only, factor in promotions. James called this “unhealthy”. She is weighing recommendations on ways to reform testing and training.

But the newly released air force documents show the focus on perfection should not be a surprise. One document that examined emergency war order test scores said, “Given the nature of the ICBM crew mission, a perfect score is the expectation.”

The pressure to be perfect apparently has driven some to cheat and others, possibly including commanders, to look the other way. There is no evidence that this has translated to unsafe handling of nuclear weapons duties, but an air force review found “a culture of toleration” at Minot that “allowed unprofessional and non-compliant behaviors”. It said launch crews had an “artificial sense of preparedness” for tests and inspections.



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