

Greetings Club Member

From President Trump's order to reposition two nuclear submarines to the commemoration of the International Day Against Nuclear Tests as well as the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear weapons have been a hot topic this August.

I'm going to stay with the theme and take a brief look at South Africa's historic nuclear weapons program. For what it lacked in size (it was small fry by international standards), it made up for in intrigue.

Given ample access to uranium (a by-product of gold mining) and a desire to develop electricity from nuclear energy, South Africa's interest in this sector dates back to the 1960s. But it was the increasing isolationism and the threat of Warsaw Pact expansionism (including the presence of surrogate Cuban forces in Angola) that provided the catalyst to take things to another level: weapons.

How South Africa obtained highly enriched uranium, developed devices, etc., is the subject of entire books (and much speculation). Suffice to say by 1989 they had 6 nuclear weapons.

Having a warhead is one thing – but it needs to be delivered. And here South Africans came up with two: an aircraft-launched glide bomb and an intermediate-range ballistic missile.



Above is a picture of me standing alongside an RSA 3 missile. "As cover for and supplement to the missile development program an indigenous space program was developed." So this missile could deliver a tactical nuclear weapon or place a small satellite in orbit. A silo-based RSA 4 intercontinental ballistic missile was under development when the entire program was cancelled.

South Africa kept the project top secret. Historians believe the strategy would have been to covertly reveal their capabilities to the United States to encourage their intervention in the event of a threat of full-scale invasion by Warsaw Pact-backed neighbours. The subsequent collapse of the Berlin Wall superseded all that.

The program and the weapons were voluntarily dismantled in 1989.

FUN FACT: the 1883 volcanic explosion on Krakatoa Island was 10,000 times larger than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Not sure which scientists were around to measure that but it must have been a helluva bang. Blocked out the sun in Europe.

Catch up with you next month.

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