7. Nuclear Archives and Photography

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John O'Brian is an art historian, writer and curator. Until 2017, he was Professor of Art History at the University of British Columbia. His publications on nuclear photography include *Strangelove's Weegee*, *Camera Atomica*, *Through Post-Atomic Eyes*, *The Bomb in the Wilderness*, and *Atomic Postcards: Radioactive Messages from the Cold War*.

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You cannot talk about archives without also talking about research and inventories and the ghosts that haunt them. Since beginning research on my first book, I have depended on archival resources, a dependency that troubles me. By inscribing my hopes and fears onto archives and what they have to offer, I have also inscribed them onto organizations that have collecting biases. Yet, I could not have written my books and essays without them, nor could I have prepared exhibitions on nuclear photography or written their accompanying catalogues.

Few aspects of the nuclear environment have escaped the camera's gaze. The camera possesses the power of deferred sight, the uncanny ability to make visible what cannot always be seen at the time of an event. Of the millions of photographs taken each day, few stick in the eye. But those that do stick in the eye lodge there for a long time. They mark vividly the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and other nuclear events. Photography is one of the primary ways, if not the primary way, that nuclear episodes and activities are represented and remembered.

I have worked in nuclear archival collections in Britain, Canada, France, Israel, Japan and the United States. Some years ago, I discovered a photograph in the Imperial War Museum, London, called “Atomic Wreck Peril.” It alerted me to an event I knew nothing about. On August 25, 1984, the French cargo ship *Mont Louis* collided with the German ferry *Olau Britannia* in the English Channel and sank off the coast of Belgium. A grainy photograph, taken at a distance with a telephoto lens, shows the *Mont Louis* listing sharply to starboard before going down. Without that shot, there would no public visual record and reduced public discussion of the accident. With a deadweight capacity of 5,000 tonnes, the *Mont Louis* was transporting 350 tonnes of uranium hexafluoride from Canada to the Soviet Union, where the gas was to undergo enrichment before being sent on to France for use in light-water reactors.

The uranium hexafluoride on board the *Mont Louis* came from ore mined and refined in Canada, but according to a press report “no one knew anything” about its cargo before the sinking. Asked about the risk caused by the collision, the nuclear scientist Yves Lenoir stated that if “the gas came into contact with sea water, radioactivity would be released into the atmosphere.” Beaches in Belgium and France were cleared of people, while the *Olau Britannia*, with 935 passengers on board, continued to its destination of Sheerness, Kent. The ferry experienced only minor damage, it was reported, and none of those on board suffered from radiation exposure. That was the official story, at any rate; it was not reported whether all the lost containers of uranium hexafluoride were recovered following the accident.

A duplicate copy of the photograph “Atomic Wreck Peril” purchased from the Imperial War Museum is now in my personal atomic archive, assembled over the past two decades. The

archive consists of military photographs, press images, snapshots, nuclear postcards, protest pamphlets, record album covers, works of art, exhibition catalogues, civil defence pamphlets, atomic kitsch, and corporate brochures. It contains of over a thousand items that I draw on heavily for my research. Nuclear representation is not only about the past. It is also about the present and uncertain futures.

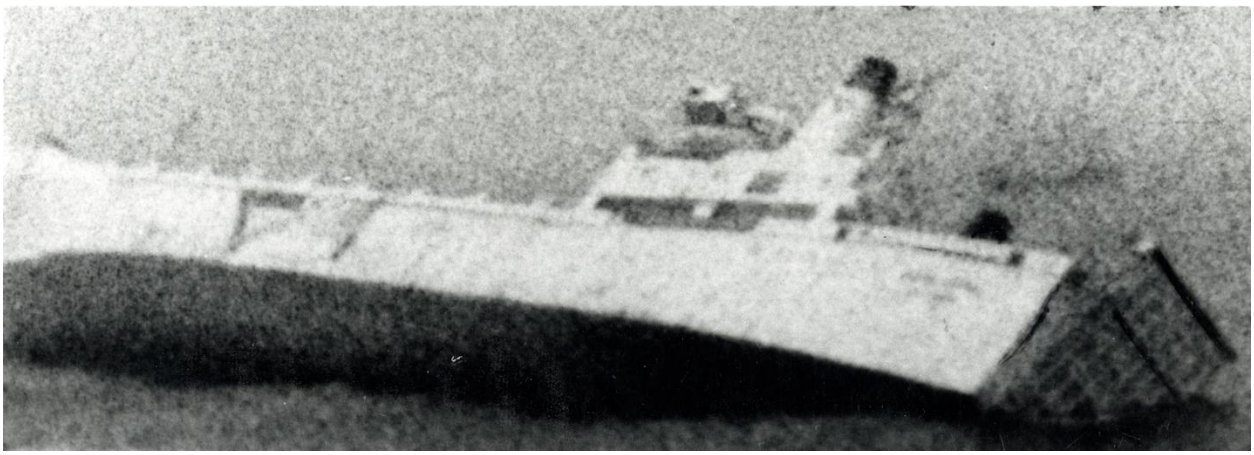

Figure 4. Atomic Wreck Peril, August 25, 1984. Gelatin silver photograph. Collection of the author. (Anonymous. Image purchased for non-commercial use from the Imperial War Museum.)