It flies through the air with the greatest of precision

March 1, 2017

While we can't be sure how many of our visitors look up in the Defense Gallery to see the casing of an AGM-86 cruise missile, it's been part of the Museum's collection since 1983. The AGM-86 series of missiles is still in use for national defense, but when the shell was purchased more than 30 years ago, it was part of our state-of-the-art weapons display. As we continue to update our nuclear safeguards exhibit, the missile may transition to storage.

In terms of the missile's background, the U.S. Air Force provides this information about the missile series and its sequential versions, represented by letters of the alphabet:

The small, winged AGM-86B/C/D missile is powered by a turbofan jet engine that propels it at sustained subsonic speeds. After launch, the missile's folded wings, tail surfaces and engine inlet deploy. The AGM-86B is then able to fly complicated routes to a target through use of a terrain contour-matching guidance system. The AGM-86C/D uses an onboard Global Positioning System coupled with its inertial navigation system to fly. This allows the missile to guide itself to the target with pinpoint accuracy.

The AGM-86 comes in two types: the AGM-86B version, which carries a nuclear warhead (it can carry the Lab's W80 payload), and the AGM-86/C/D versions, which carry a conventional (non-nuclear) payload. The AGM signifier stands for "air-launched, surface-attack guided missile." The missile is also described as an ALCM, which stands for "air-launched cruise missile."

When acquired, the casing currently on display cost $40,000 which, when adjusted for inflation, would be more than $116,000 today. Documentation from the acquisition indicates that a working version of the missile would have cost about $1 million at the time, or almost $3 million in last year's dollars. We acquired the item from the U.S. Air Force, and Boeing was its manufacturer.

Other examples of AGM-86A and AGM-86B missiles are part of the collection at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center of the National Air and Space Museum, part of the Smithsonian.

1350 Central Avenue
Los Alamos, NM 87545

BRADBURY SCIENCE museum

(505) 667-4444
www.lanl.gov/museum

Operated by Los Alamos National Security, LLC for the Department of Energy's NNSA