



Flights, missiles and fire

It now seems more than possible that the Boeing 737-800 passenger aircraft that crashed in Iran two days ago was shot down by a missile fired in error.

It would not be the first time. In 2014, flight MH17 from Holland to Malaysia was shot down by a missile that seems to have been inadvertently fired from the ground.

These are accidents, but they do not come in isolation. In 2014, there was a confrontation on the ground between Ukrainian forces and Russian-funded rebel forces; this week, the Iranians clearly had their missiles firing at US targets in retaliation for the murder of their general by the Americans.

In 2014, 298 people died as the plane crashed in Donestsk, this week 176 people have died just outside Tehran. By way of comparison, that combined figure is more than the entire number of British fatalities in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2015.

Those with children will be familiar with the scenario whereby an adult in the garden is on the receiving end of a football that was a shot at a goal several yards away but which was misdirected and can still hit with force. As the adult reels from the force, this usually results in a scolding from the adult, and when the child says, "It's not my fault; I didn't mean it," the child is nevertheless charged with a combination of carelessness, recklessness and the fact that the last thing to come into contact with the ball was the

child's foot.

Of course, no American targeted the Ukraine jet, but the fact is that the missile wouldn't have been put into firing alert without the assassination of General Soleimani. And while the Iranians proudly pointed out that their retaliation against the Americans didn't kill anyone at the airbase (showing 'restraint'), in fact, their military stance was not without cost. Five years ago, the Russians had no intention of killing Dutch tourists, but they did so by the hundred, as a result of their aggression in Ukraine.

Robert McNamara was the US Secretary of Defence from 1961 to 1968 as the Vietnam war approached its height. Initially convinced of its importance, he resigned in disenchantment that the war could ever be won, and whether it was ever justifiable in the first place. He then devoted his years in retirement to advocating for a world without nuclear weapons. Having been close to military command, he knew just how easy it was for triggers to be pulled by accident and for escalation to be uncontrollable. Taking nuclear weapons off the table would stop the worst possibilities.

He was right that this is in fact the most likely route to a nuclear holocaust; not through a full-on decision, but a general escalation and then someone carelessly pulling a trigger, or a random fit of pique or moment of madness by someone in a position of power. This week's tragic accident is a reminder of this.

Jan 2020 Thought. for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.