

The Night The Earth Stood Still.

(C) Steve Douglass

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On Wednesday, Jan. 25, 1995, the finger of Russian President Boris Yeltsin was on the nuclear button. Early warning radars indicated that Russia was under missile attack. Strategic Russian military forces were on maximum alert. Reacting to the crisis, Yeltsin reached into a black suitcase, picked up his portable hotline and began conferring with his generals. Was it a real attack? Was the unthinkable happening? If the go-code was given most of Europe would have disappeared under a nuclear holocaust.

Across the world the U.S. nuclear machine was alert and ready to respond. Remote listening posts and U.S. spy satellites eavesdropping on Russian military communications picked up the telltale signs of increased Russian military activity. Although it wasn't quite clear what was going on, as a precautionary measure the U.S. strategic forces were also placed on alert. But by 5:30 am (EST) the crisis was over. The button didn't get pressed and the world went on. As morning commuters began to clog the freeways, and housewives did the morning dishes, as school kids boarded the bus for school, and the citizens of the world went about their daily business, none of them were aware how close we came to the brink.

What was the cause of this Cold War style East-West missile crisis? Was it a misunderstanding, or a simple mistake in military judgement? Some say it was a political scenario dreamed up by President Yeltsin to prove to the West that he still has a firm grasp on the military reins in his country. Others suggest it was a covert plot hatched by the U.S. intelligence community to test Russian military readiness. To find out, we need to take a look at the events as they unfolded on January 25, 1995.

At 2:00 AM (EST) on Andoya island (a Norwegian arctic outpost) a space research missile was launched. Officially, this NASA sanctioned mission was to gather data on the Aurora Borealis. Because of the close proximity of Russia to the launch site (620 miles from the Russian mainland) the launch was announced months in advance. Moscow was well aware of the planned launch with the information passed on to the relevant Russian military authorities. Over 600 missiles had been fired from Andoya since 1962 so the launch should have not come as a surprise to anyone.

However, something was different about this launch and it sent the Russian strategic forces into a panic. On the Koala Peninsula (possibly at the ABM/BMEW site at Murmansk) Russian Air Force early-warning-radar technicians tracked the missile. Their radar scopes displayed something curious. Instead of behaving like a typical scientific research vehicle, the missile roared hundreds of miles higher than any ever launched from Andoya. The radar telemetry changed as the missile shed its stages, indicating it was a four-stage rocket. Finally it reached an altitude of 900 miles and slowly began to arc over. The technicians recognized the trajectory of the missile as that typical of a nuclear-tipped ICBM. As a result, Russian strategic forces went on full military alert and President Boris Yeltsin was notified. From a command center in Moscow's version of the White House, Yeltsin picked up his hot-lines and began conferring with his military generals.

Meanwhile back in the USA, military radio hobbyists were routinely monitoring communications on the Global High Frequency System (GHFS). The GHFS shortwave radio network is used by the U.S. military as the reliable long-distance communication network. GHFS channels are also used by U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM). STRATCOM messages are routinely monitored by military radio hobbyists. Usually these coded messages consist of numbers and letters read phonetically over GHFS channels. Although never confirmed by the military some of these messages are practice "EAMs" or Emergency Action Messages containing the "go-codes" directing the military to go to war. Test EAMs can be heard several times an hour on GHFS, NAVY HICOM, and discrete USSTRATCOM frequencies throughout the shortwave spectrum. EAMs usually begin with the cryptic call "SKYKING SKYKING DO NOT ANSWER" followed by the text of the message. A typical test EAM consists of 12 to 20 characters and only on rare occasions do they exceed 30 characters. An EAM is also followed by an "authentication code" so strategic forces can verify that it is real.

Once USSTRATCOM forces receive the message, it is compared with sealed orders located in a safe or vault on the aircraft, ship, or missile site. If the orders are confirmed and authenticated, the "Strategic Integrated Operations Plan" (SIOP) is consulted to see what the plan of attack is. Fortunately most are only test messages but occasionally (during times of international crisis) these messages are obviously placing strategic forces on alert to be ready for military action.

One of the longest EAMs monitored in recent years was the one that signaled the beginning of the gulf war. Military monitors also reported frequent and long EAMs during the failed Soviet soup, but since the Cold War ended the EAMs have been broadcast with less frequency, likely due to the partial stand down of nuclear alert status. Until the night of January 25, 1995.

Many military monitors noted a lengthy EAM. The message consisted of 54 phonetic parts. After the message was initially sent, it could be heard being echoed by remote transmitters on almost all GHFS, USSTRATCOM, and CANFORCE channels. Although the contents of the message were encoded and only known to those who had top secret access, it was apparent to anyone listening in that something was going on.

The EAM was repeated almost nonstop for over 20 minutes. Is it possible that the alert level of STRATCOM forces was bumped up a notch? Could an alert have been called because recon satellites discovered Russian strategic forces scrambling to action? Calls to Cheyenne Mountain, NORAD and the Pentagon only yielded the same answer, "We were aware of the Norwegian launch and were tracking it."

In Moscow, Russian President Boris Yeltsin was busy deciding how to handle the situation. From the Russian military's point of view the parabolic trajectory of the missile indicated it was obviously not a scientific research vehicle. Of the hundreds of missiles launched from Andoya, none had reached such altitude and displayed the unmistakable trajectory of a ballistic missile, instead of following the usual pattern of flying straight up to an altitude of 100 miles and then tumbling downward into the sea,

Yeltsin was advised that this missile followed a parabolic, four stage to high trajectory profile of middle-range, ground-to-ground tactical missile. The radar signature of the rocket was also twice as big as anything ever launched from Andoya, indicating to the Russians that it was large enough to carry a tactical nuclear payload.

Russian President Yeltsin made his decision. At approximately 1:48 A.M. (EST) the missile was destroyed and it fell in the region of the Spitzbergen archipelago. Conflicting reports say the Russians shot it down with an antiballistic missile. Norwegian Lt. Col. Espen of the Norway defense command at Bodoe told the international press that the missile went down as planned and landed in the Spitzbergen region. Military monitors noted around 3:00 A.M. (EST) that the communications on GHFS channels returned to normal traffic.

A Russian Interfax News Agency story released a few hours later started an international scare, triggered alarm bells in the West and rocked currency markets. The initial report (quoting government sources) said the Russian air defenses had shot down a "combat missile" fired at them from a country in northern Europe. Interfax quoted the source as saying the missile violated Russian air space and was destroyed. The Russian military was quick to react to the Interfax report, realizing the West would regard the shooting down of the missile as a violation of the SALT II treaty which stipulates that anti-ballistic missile systems are only allowed to be deployed around Moscow. Quickly, Russian air defence released the terse statement, "Moscow region air defenses did not bring down any missile today."

Later Interfax released another story quoting an official of the Russian air defense command saying that three Russian early warning systems had picked up a launch of a combat missile in Norway. This source stated that it soon became clear that the missile would fall outside Russian territory, contradicting the initial report that it was shot down.

It's interesting to note that at the same time the British defense ministry was quick to state that they "had nothing to do with the NATO missile alert." U.S. administration officials were quick to follow up with the statement saying they doubted that any such incident had taken place.

Meanwhile, Norwegian officials scrambled to clarify that the alert was not their fault. According to a Reuter's report, Andoya spokesman Kolbjoren Adolfsen said, "We told them (the Russians) what type of rocket was going to be fired, (the center used a refurbished NATO missile) where it was going to land and we indicated a time period from January 15 to February 5 with a daily window from 5 A.M. to 12 P.M..." Adolfsen went on to say "For 32 years we have done this. We study the Northern lights over Spitzbergen in daytime. It is pitch dark up there at this time of year. We have fired 607 rockets since the project started."

Adlofsen suggested the Russians might have over reacted because of the high-ballistic trajectory of the four-stage rocket. Norwegian Ambassador Per Tresselt suggested that official measures should be taken to avoid a recurrence for the incident which, in the Norway's opinion, was an over reaction by Russian strategic forces and not the fault of the Norwegian government.

The Russians were not so conciliatory. An unnamed general told Izvestia "What kind of meteorological rocket is multi-staged, flies further than 600 miles along a ballistic (parabolic) trajectory rather than 185 miles straight up?" Izvestia also quoted the head of the Central Aerological Observatory, Professor A. Chernikov as saying, "The rocket fit the profile of a mid-range ground-to-ground military missile." Only adding to the controversy was Yeltsin himself, who in comments to the Interfax news agency suggested that the launch was NATO-member Norway and their Western defense partners way of testing Russian military readiness.

Although alarming, the thought of testing Russian defenses in this way is not an unlikely scenario. Throughout the Cold War years, the U.S. intelligence community has engaged in a technique to test Soviet military readiness by provoking their military to respond to intrusions into its sovereign air space. Known in intelligence community terms as "Tickling the bear's tail" aircraft (such as specially equipped reconnaissance gathering aircraft as the RC-135 "Cobra Ball") would intentionally violate Soviet airspace to provoke a reaction. When the Soviets would respond, the RC-135's job was to high-tail it out of Soviet airspace, all the while gathering electronic intelligence "ELINT," on Soviet response times, mapping radar sites (RADINT), and recording Soviet communications (COMINT). The scenario was played out thousands of times during the Cold War, sometimes resulting in tragedy. Although records on Cobra Ball missions are still classified, RC-135 pilots have told this author that numerous Cobra Ball aircraft were shot down.

Authors note: Recently the following response was posted to me via e-mail: *The COBRA BALL was NEVER, EVER used to "intentionally violate Soviet airspace" or even do so unintentionally. Because it was a "National Technical Means" of verifying Soviet compliance with international arms agreements, it operated with the full (if not always tacit) approval of the Soviet Union. Indeed, under international agreement the Soviets provided advance warning of missile launches precisely to enable the COBRA BALL to be airborne and in position to monitor the missile re-entry. Although "tickling" flights by other aircraft are well documented, the COBRA BALL neither undertook such flights nor was it equipped to collect any intelligence that might be acquired as a result of such incursions, nor did it work in conjunction with any other platforms to acquire this intelligence.*

Moreover, no COBRA BALL (or ANY other RC-135 of any variant for that matter) has EVER been shot down. There have been only five (5) RC-135S aircraft (One RIVET BALL and four COBRA BALLS). Two crashed while landing at Shemya AFB, Alaska, and three are still in service with the 55th Wg at Offutt AFB, Nebraska. Anyone who represented himself as an RC-135S COBRA BALL pilot and told you that "numerous Cobra Ball aircraft were shot down" was lying to you about the losses or about being a COBRA BALL pilot or both. There were Cold War losses of other aircraft types involved with aerial reconnaissance, but none of these were any version of RC-135 or KC-135 or EC-135 or any other KC-135 MDS.

In addition to the material on the COBRA BALL that appears in my book, I wrote and published a history of the airplane and its mission titled "COBRA BALL/COBRA EYE: Alaskan Observers" in World Air Power Journal #8. I trust that you may wish to confirm these facts which these two references provide. Perhaps you may then revise your interesting piece on an important part of Cold War history and present an accurate account of the role of the RC-135S COBRA BALL instead of the fiction currently presented.

Sincerely,

Robert S. Hopkins, III, PhD
24th SRS/6th SRW Eielson AFB, AK
pilot, RC-135S, RC-135X
1987-1990

Thanks, Robert, ... I stand corrected!

- Steve Douglass

It was a Cobra Ball aircraft that the Soviets thought they had downed over Sakhalin Island when they shot down the Korean Airlines (KAL 007) killing all on board. Cobra Ball missions yielded excellent data on Soviet military capabilities and readiness.

In recent months preceding the incident, Russia became embroiled in a nasty military campaigning Chechnya. Reports coming out of Chechnya painted a picture of a Russian Army out of control. Some Russian troops deserted their posts stating that their commanding officers were not being controlled by Moscow. Doubts about Russian command began to appear in the West. Many defense analysts rightly began to wonder, if President Yeltsin wasn't in control of his military, who was?

It is possible that deep inside the NRO or CIA a scenario was devised to answer these questions. By "tickling the bear's tail" and provoking a response, the nuclear command and control structure of the Russian military could be ascertained.

Another scenario suggests that it was Yeltsin himself who took advantage of the Norwegian launch to prove to the world that he was solidly in charge. According to a Reuter's report, diplomats in Moscow suggested Yeltsin, under fire for the military mess in Chechnya, had set out to show his military (and the Western powers) that Russian military was still an effective nuclear power. In OSLO Norway, newspapers suggested it was Yeltsin's way of showing he is still the top dog in the Kremlin.

In any event, on January 25 the game was played out and the results were nearly disastrous. Only Pentagon and Russian insiders know if it was an accident or the result of intelligence agencies involved in a deadly game of cat and mouse.

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