

Midnight and counting

Stanislav Petrov was declared to have died on September 18th

“The man who saved the world” was 77



Print edition | Obituary

Sep 30th 2017

OVER the years, Stanislav Petrov got used to those telephone calls. Typically they would come at night or at the weekend, just as he was unwinding. He would lift the receiver to hear the jaunty strains of “Arise, our mighty country!” in his ear, and know that he had to get dressed, now, and get to the the base. It was a pain. But in the nervy 1970s and 1980s, when an American attack on the Soviet Union might happen at any time, an alert might be a practice, or might be the real thing. Either

way, the motherland had to be defended.

“The base” was the secret Serpukhov-15 early-warning facility, near Moscow. He had worked there—since graduation, with top honours, from the Radio-Technical College in Kiev—monitoring surveillance by Oko satellites of the missile launch areas of the United States. Its core was a room of 200 computer operators over which, when he was on duty, he would preside from a glassed-in mezzanine office. On one wall of the computer room, an electronic world map lit up the American launch areas: six of them, with a total of 1,000 missiles aimed at the USSR. Just above his eye level, a wall’s-width screen glowed a dull red. If nothing appeared on it, all was well.

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He worked regular command shifts as well as the alerts, twice a month, just to keep in training. Even his wife Raisa didn’t know what his work was. And, though this was combat duty, not much was doing: by 10pm, after supper and a smoke, they would await the late-night orbit, all quiet.

September 26th 1983 was different. At half past midnight, the red screen flashed “START”. A missile was coming. The siren howled. In the room below, people leapt from their seats. Everyone looked up at him. He had frozen. The message seemed odd: one missile would not mean the all-out attack they were expecting. But how did he know? Scared stiff, he roared at everyone to get back to work. When he managed to pick up the phone, he reported a fault in the system. But then it saw a second missile. A third, a fourth, a fifth: “probability of attack, 100%”. In ten minutes, ground radar could confirm it. But in 12 minutes the missiles, if they were coming, would hit Russia. High command needed 12 minutes to organise their response.

His hands shaking, he called his superiors again. Again he reported a malfunction, not a strike. The officer at the other end was drunk, but somehow passed it on. Mr

Petrov then waited for 15 unbearable minutes. And nothing happened. There was indeed a fault in the system: the satellite had been fooled by the sun's rays reflecting off clouds high over North Dakota, which had two launch areas. Every time he remembered that moment when his call proved right, his lean face would break into a smile of sheer relief.

His coolness had saved the world from nuclear apocalypse. Or so other people said. He knew that, at the time, he had not been cool. His chair had felt red-hot as a frying pan, his legs limp as cotton. Some of his doubts were logical: the newness of the system, and the too-swift passage of the message through the 30 layers of verification he had set up himself. Other doubts were vaguer: a funny gut feeling, and a sense that he knew better than a machine. Even so, his decision to declare a false alarm was a 50-50 guess, no better. Small wonder that, when it was over, he felt as wrung-out as Jesus on Golgotha.

The fact that he was basically a scientist, with a civilian training, also influenced him. Much as he had longed to be a fighter pilot like his father, a career soldier would probably have passed on the message without thinking. There were safeguards against going to war, or not, on the say-so of one man; other authorities had to be involved. But in such febrile times, one rooster crowing was likely to set off all the others in the village.

As for those military cockerels, they were horribly embarrassed by what he had done. So were all those renowned academicians who had spent billions devising the surveillance system. They did not thank him for showing them up, for it was an old rule in Russia that the subordinate must never be cleverer than the boss. Instead, they rapped him for failing to fill in the operations log that night. Come on, he thought. A few months later he left the army anyway to take a job as a research engineer and to care for Raisa, who had cancer. And so things went for several years. When she died, and money got tight, he mostly lived on potatoes and tea brewed from herbs he picked in the park.

Tea and potatoes

His story stayed secret until 1998. When it came out, he was feted in the West. He

toured America, starred in a documentary, was commended at the UN and received the Dresden peace prize. Sometimes he enjoyed the fuss, but bitterness over his treatment at home would surface all the same. He was often tetchy with reporters who made their way to his small, grubby flat on 60th Anniversary of the USSR Street, in Fryazino north-east of Moscow, and sat in his bare kitchen with the star-chart on the wall. He had done nothing, he would tell them, except his duty and his job. And all he had to show for that was the TV his colleagues at Serpukhov-15 had given him when he left, and the telephone that had been installed, free, by the army when he drew his pension. It had been cut off for non-payment, and never rang now.

This article appeared in the Obituary section of the print edition under the headline "Midnight and counting"

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