



1983: THE BRINK OF APOCALYPSE

INTERVIEWS

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Soviet Nuclear Missile Force

(ORIGINAL INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN RUSSIAN)

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- Q 21:00:41 What position were you in in autumn 1983?
- A 21:00:49 In the summer 1983 I graduated from the academy of the general staff of the USSR and I was appointed to be in charge of the mid range missiles of the operative department of the general headquarters of strategic missile forces.
- Q 21:01:35 When you were did the military discuss at that time the military in the academy and in the general staff - did you discuss the possibility of a sudden nuclear strike on behalf of NATO under the pretext of exercises?
- A 21:02:00 Er the period of the early 80s was the time of the peak of tension of the strategic situation. Er it was in connection with the movement of soviet troops into Afghanistan and to count that move or as a reaction to that move Ronald Reagan refused to rectify the soviet American treaty on the limitation of strategic weapons. And declared the Soviet Union the evil empire. In 1980 he called for a boycott of

the Olympic Games er that er were going to take place in Moscow. The Americans were giving help to the afghan muschahads er who were fighting against the soviet troops. Er also at that time er was er a new round of nuclear build up or nuclear race. Er in the late 70s the Soviet Union er in its strategic er missile forces started to re-equip the mid range missiles.

21:03:51 Er the soviets introduced the pioneer er missile complex. Er it er has a range of er up to four and a half thousand metres er which made it possible to hit all the targets er in Western Europe from the territory launching missiles er from er the territory of the Soviet Union. And er this er made it possible for strategic missiles er to be targeted er in distant er regions er and er in er on the American continent. So the balance of forces was er at that time in favour of the soviet union and as a reaction to that er the Americans started to deploy in Europe - er they are pushing to and er cruise - ground base crews missiles though the range was up to two and a half thousand kilometres which made it possible for them to destroy targets

er on the territory of the soviet union or the European part of the soviet union.

21:05:17 But the main threat was that er the time needed for and cruise missiles er it took six eight - from six to eight minutes for those missiles to reach Moscow. And er it er gave the Americans an opportunity to destroy the leadership er soviet leadership in the Kremlin very quickly and to decapitate er the Soviet Union and er it er made the er return strike the chance of giving the return strike well er more difficult. And this er the large scale exercises were fraught with danger because er at that er under the pretext of those exercises a sudden nuclear er strike could have been delivered.

21:06:30 We can't say it was at a unilateral danger it was a er bilateral danger because when the Warsaw pack er countries held exercises er using er nuclear forces er it also was a source of concern. Er it increased tension er among er the western countries - data countries - the NATO exercise in 1983 was one of er such exercises be' - they involved a strategic attack forces of the united states - of course these

increased er tension among the soviet leadership. Er they er had to stay vigilant er and not to er not to overlook the moment when the nuclear strike might have been delivered er against the Soviet Union.

Q 21:07:54 Er speaking about this concern on behalf of the soviet political and military leadership did you - how did you know about it - from conversations from er the papers that you read - what was said about those able arch exercises and what measures were taken in the general headquarters or in the missile er army headquarters?

A 21:08:34 Er the information about the forthcoming er able archer exercise - large scale exercise that was er NATO exercise that was going to take place in November 1983 er it involved er well American strategic forces and this information came through gro' er the military intelligence er and er at the time a marshal of the artillery er marshal of the artillery Talookof who was er head of staff of er missile forces er received reports every day. and er certain mea'

return measures had to be taken er
on the 2nd November when the NATO
exercise began er on the orders of
the general staff of the armed
forces of the USSR.

21:09:55 Er in the missile for strategic
missile forces secretly let
secretly some measures - some er
measures aimed at increasing er well
state of alert er was - certain
measures were taken. Er duty forces
er were aware on constant er alert.
The operative forces er were on
combat alert er apart from that er
as I was involved with the mid range
missiles and part of those - and
partly the pioneer missile complex
is the regiments that had those mi'
missile complexes were sent to to
the field positions in the peaceful
time er only about 10 may be a
maximum er percent of those
regiments were in the field
positions but during the able archer
exercise er about 50% of those er
regiments were in field positions.
And it increased the readiness of
those er missile complexes for
delivering the return strike er in
case of a sudden nuclear attack.

21:11:41 Er for us the potential enemy er was
er the er United States of America

and our missiles were aimed at the United States of America. Er the order er was er that the strategic - first strategic er missile forces to be in a enhanced state of er nuclear alert.

21:12:29 Yes he mentioned various stages of nuclear alerts er and er at that time the missile forces were on the enhanced state of nuclear alert.

Q 21:13:13 In 1983 er these pioneer complexes were - in what - where were they - what were these field positions?

A 21:13:41 The idea to er place the er missile regiments er was pioneer missiles er in field positions - the idea was the following, if the er - this location is known to the er enemy er so the idea was to move the regiments away from the known places of ordinary of common dislocation. Er the distance was er up from 100 to 150 kilometres er in the mountainous area the er distance was er shorter because er the of the possibility to stay in radio contact. Er pioneer missile complex er has good er capability of crossing the rough terrain. Er the modern equivalent is topple and

topple is an intercontinental missile but its predecessor was pioneer missile.

21:15:00 And this complex could even go through the swamps because it had special chassis that made that increased its rough terrain capacity. It could cross rivers with a depth up to well shallow rivers but still rivers and it could penetrate into the woods. Into the woods those launches - autonomous launches were placed and also we had camouflaging devices which also absorbed radio signals.

21:15:52 And this is why a radio location intelligence it was difficult for radio intelligence to locate the place of our missile complexes. This was a special - this was special nets that imitated the ground or the - well woods the leaves and such nets covered the missile complexes. And these nets could be removed well when it was necessary to raise the missiles and to target them. So first of all this missile complex was placed in the wood and the place of dislocation was chosen in advance. Those field positions were chosen

in advance taking into consideration the opportunities for camouflaging the presence of the routes of approach before the launch.

21:17:11 Er the the er missile complex had to be raised er - there had to be er firm ground for this. Er it is asking to specify about those nets - camouflaging nets er that concealed the presence - they were made of a special material er they were very expensive nets er that er concealed er the presence of the m' missile complex from er well er radio reconnaissance or radio intell' radio reconnaissance. They could be folded and unfolded er if you - they looked like er er kind of hoods like er material which made it - it is a stellst technology. Er the same principle as stellst - radio absorbent elements - it's a very complicated specially designed er material. Er there are similar devices in the west.

Q 21:18:40 Er what were the strengths of the pioneer complex?

A 21:18:45 Er the pioneer complex er there were three warheads with a splitting er splitting warheads er were individually guided. Three blocks

er each er 200 kilo tonnes er strong
er it was 15 Hiroshima's er to make
it clear to white public. Each
block er would be guided to its own
target and after er separating from
the er launcher there was a micro
engine and er micro computer and the
micro computer in the certain parts
of the trajectory er could split the
blocks each to each target during
the exercises.

Q 21:20:20 Er during the able archer exercises
things didn't come - well things
didn't go too far and you didn't
have to launch missiles.

A 21:20:39 Er fortunately er well even during
the climax of the exercises er to
the - well and this key event of the
exercises coincided with the
celebrations of the anniversary of
the great October socialist
revolution. Er fortunately er the
er disaster - no disaster took place
- we didn't have to keep increasing
the er alert of the strategic er
missile forces. Nor did we have to
do anything er - we didn't have to
er get close to the launch - when on
the 14th November the exercises were
over er the strategic forces er were

er brought back to their er normal positions.

Q 21:21:40 If things er had er - if things had gone according to the worst possible scenarios what would have happened - you said that Borsings er needed from 6 to 8 minutes to decapitate these soviet leadership er how er many minutes would er the pioneer missiles have needed to hit their targets after receiving the order to deliver the strike?

A 21:22:29 Er well sometime would have taken to put the missiles er to the vertical positions then er the launch er first it er - he explains the technicalities of er launching the missile. It has to be raised to the height of er 20 metres so er it would have taken 2 minutes 30 seconds between the er moment of receiving the order to er bringing er the missiles to the launching position.

21:23:11 Er it always took 2 people er who act in agreement with each other er to affect the launch. Er altogether it would have taken 3 minutes - plus the time er well that would have taken the soviet leadership to er ok

to make the decision about the launch. And to pass the codes to er decode the blocking devices.

21:23:56 Er both the soviets and the Americans have the same system so the time - what strategic missile men fear is that time may be lost on take too much time can be wasted on the decision making - on the political decision making. Er fortunately it never happened in real life but judging by the exercises involving the senior leadership of the country er well minimum 3 4 minutes are needed for the senior leadership to er take er the decision.

Q 21:24:50 So you mean that er our missiles might have er taken off er shortly er - might have been launched shortly before er reached its targets - their targets?

21:25:19 Why er was it necessary to move the er missile complexes to the field positions to make sure that our targets er - the targets for the enemy are not destroyed er by the time er the soviet leadership has er made its decision to deliver the strike to ensure that the complexes survive.

A 21:25:51 The worst concern er of the soviet missile men was er that the general secretary would take too long to think er about what to do. If Persians took 6 8 minutes the general secretary of course - this is the general secretary's time to make a decision reduced very much. er from Washington to Moscow it took er a missile 30 minutes er it of course gave the general secretary more time but er from Europe to Moscow it took less because er it left er in case of Persians deployed in Europe it gave the general secretary something like 2 minutes to make er his decision.

Q 21:26:54 So during the trainings er it took the general secretary something like 3 minutes to make a decision and it left you with very little time er cos

A 21:27:11 yes if the su' - if we imagine this exchange of strikes our situation would have been er very er difficult but of course er we had also the asian territory er well beyond the er where we also had our missile complexes. And er it means we would have delivered the return

strike anyway but er it would have been less effective.

21:27:53 The soviet - er why the soviet union decided to er sign the er the treaty er about scraping the er mid range missiles er according to that treaty the soviet union scrapped more mid range missiles than er the Americans scrapped of Persians and cruise missiles. But er politically it was a profitable move and even er more profitable move er militarily.

A 21:28:45 The - now he's speaking about now er it would take er both the sovi' - the Russians now and the Americans 30 minutes to er - it would take missiles the same time 30 minutes to reach the enemies continent.

Q 21:29:35 Oh what was special about er those October revolution holidays - why was it the peak of tension er during that exercise.

A 21:29:50 Er because on those days er in the - during the NATO exercise they were practising the er delivering a nuclear strike against the reds. Er they never say soviets they would say oh the blue - the blues against the reds. And the blues were

delivering er according to their
plan against the reds.

Q 21:30:24 And er during that exercise if they
had had that in mind er they could
have delivered a real nuclear
strike.

A 21:30:46 Er we - er every 6 or 8 hours er we
received information from the
military intelligence er about the
course of that exercise and er
during that climax we er had er our
state of alert was increased. The
commanders of the missions - the
commanders of the regiments rocket
army were er full time er in their
command centres and they were on the
most heightened state of alert
waiting for the orders er to er well
everyone was in constant radio link.
Er in order to be ready to pass the
orders er to each other and the
commanders spent - the commander of
missile forces spent the whole night
er in the bunker.

21:31:55 Not er - he was in the bunker not in
the headquarters er without taking
any rest.

Q 21:32:03 The situation was taken seriously?

A 21:32:05 Yes er because there had been a build up and tension and we were very er nervous about er the possibility of Persians destroying er the soviet leadership and er such er - the principle is that the minimal of time should be taken on decision making and the maximum of time should be given for the troops to act. I was in charge of mid range er missiles and I was er involved in developing er the er schedule er for the mid range missiles.

Q 21:33:08 In that bunker could you go to sleep for a couple of hours at least?

A 21:33:13 Er yes of course - it's a big building underground er with er several er layers of protection. It was built er everything was taken into account - er the dining room and food was prepared and there were supplies of food and there were places to sleep.

End 21:33:37

(22:00:34)

(22:00:55) Q

In case of a sudden nuclear strike which might have happened in November 1983 there was very little time for Andropov to think about what to do. If a strike had taken place and if he had 3 minutes what would the and Andropov have done?

(22:01:46) A

Unfortunately I don't know what they were really doing - I just don't have this information. Er I can only speculate about er what they would have done if they er if the Americans had delivered a sudden nuclear strike missile strike against the territory of the soviet union. Er when the er had received this er information about the fact of the launch general secretary Andropov er who always er had next to him two officers er carrying the nuclear briefcase - so called black briefcase er with the er device er that can send a message to the strategic missile forces er initiating the use of nuclear weapons er I don't know how skilful how well trained Andropov was in using that equipment. I assume he (22:03:22) was trained and er I'm sure he would have been able er to do it - it wasn't a simple thing to

do - it wasn't er er - it wasn't part of er his routine - daily routine - it would have taken a special effort er and er the state leader had to er had to be ready for such decisions.

And nexus - far as I know next to his room there were officers er ready any minute to er operate this briefcase.

(22:04:33) Er Andropov was in hospital in Konsova - if he was - if he had been in the Kremlin er he could have er escaped er to the nuclear shelter but he - er the er feature of this er system of what we call passing the sanction er for using the nuclear missiles er is that no matter where the leader of the soviet union is er he always had a chance - he always could put send a message er initiating the use of nuclear er missiles. This system did not er require any cables or anything. er there were special er system of radio channels which made it possible in 1983 er at that time satellite communications were not (22:06:03) that reliable er so no matter what where he was he could have been able to pass er - send his

order. This is why when Mikhail Gobachov when he was during the coo of 1991 in Faros er said that he didn't have any means of communication - he was lying because he - these er nuclear briefcase officers were with him. and er Gobachov could have er talked to anyone anywhere in the world including the president of the er the united states. Well this is of course besides the point but its an interesting piece of information.

(22:07:02) Q

If Andropov had been in the Kremlin

(22:07:08)

I understand the question er it becomes er it's the question of not of personal security but the question of passing the message er and er the leader of the country first has to er do his duty er give the order initiating the return strike. But er its his second priority to think about his life.

Now it's the generals mobile so

(22:08:27) Q

Er was everyone er in the military in the leadership on alert?

(22:08:35) A

Er this is absolutely right - not only the military forces er are in the state of er heightened alert but of course the political leadership were also on the state of alert. They were in their offices er they er were in a special place called the centre of er government control. Er the general secretary doesn't necessarily have to be be - have to be there himself. He could have delegated responsibility and send the person number 2 to that government control er centre if the person number 1 was er ill and er in the er hospital. There are certain protocols that er envisage all that how you can put the country from the peaceful state to the state of alert - its everything is envisaged.

(22:09:56) Q

Can you tell us more about this state of - this er government control centre?

(22:10:17) A

Er it's a building deep in the ground which er had all the life supporting systems supplies of water food er air regeneration system like on a submarine. Er which er made it possible to use fresh but not contaminated air and er there is a

protection against er the shock of
the strike.

(22:11:02) Q Er how many er – how much time
can you spend there?

(22:11:06) A It depends on the type of of
this er bunker. In the er mode of
complete isolation it can be up to
10 er days in a less extreme mode it
can – you can last say up to 30 er
30 days. Er the supplies of food
and water can be replenished daily
er in order to maintain a certain
level.

(22:12:07) Q Do you think that in that worst
period in the – during the peak of
tension would a or have
been in that bunker?

(22:12:33) A I don't know where the minister
of defence was but er the chief of
general staff marshal Agarkov was er
– er at the – was in the shelter at
the central er command – in the
command centre of the armed forces
of the USSR. Er I remember hearing
him speaking er to to other well
army commanders – missile
commanders.

(22:13:25) Q You are absolutely sure that Agarkov was in that secret military bunker?

(22:13:35) A Yeah judging by the er radio er context I can I can be sure he was there.

Er during the climax of the NATO exercise when the strategic missile forces were on the heightened er combat alert I can say with a high degree of confidence that the er marshal Agarkov was in the protected central command point of the armed forces of the USSR because I was er part of the missile forces er headquarters and er marshal Tolloopkor er was in radio link with er marshal Agarkov and that was linked with that sheltered bunker which means that marshal Agarkov was there.

(22:15:16) Q So things were that serious that marshal Agarkov er was in that bunker?

(22:15:25) A Yes the situation was quite complicated and er such er was and even in the future er during every er NATO exercise or united states army exercise so such order always

repeated itself during the
exercises. Er it wasn't just the
one off thing of 1983 - I remember
the same was in 1985. er it was not
a NATO exercise but it was the
American strategic forces exercise
and we also increased er the combat
alert - there were orders er for -
and we did it secretly from the
enemy. Er we didn't er er raise the
army on alert er we did it in a -
well through the system of orders.
Passing the order to - directly to
the commanders. Er we er created
the picture of doing the exercise er
well er we never - we'd never expose
(22:17:13) the true nature. Er the
able archer exercise was preceded by
two large exercises that was held by
the Warsaw treaty er countries er
with the soviet union as the leading
force. Er it was west 80 and east
81 er exercises involving strategic
er nuclear missile forces and er
they er I'm sure that the Americans
didn't feel any better er than we er
felt an' didn't felt as less nervous
than we felt in November 1983.

(22:19:27) Q

In the beginning of our
interview you said that during the
able arch exercise 50% of the mid
range er missile regiments er that

were equipped or armed with a
pioneer complexes were in the
fields.

I'm talking about pioneer complexes
specifically. Each pioneer had
three or warheads. The missile was
or equipped with or divisible or
splitting or warhead or - how many
of such pioneer complexes did you
have?

(22:20:40) A

When that group or was fully
deployed or - by the - when the
deployment was full in 1987 or there
were about 200 - there were 200
slightly over 240 autonomous missile
..... missile launches. In 1983
there were 150 of them.

So it meant - on the - 50% of them
were 75 - that is 75 were in the
field positions.

Or but it doesn't mean that only
pioneer launches or would have been
fired or but or there were other
missiles like intercontinental
missiles and other or mid range
missiles. The total number
intercontinental missiles at the
time was over 700 and they also had
(22:21:58) or divisible warheads and

sometime some of the warheads had er up to 6 or 10 blocks plus er the er missiles on the submarines - by the time in 1991 the er treaty on er limiting strategic er weapons when the USSR and the USA signed the treaty the strength of the strategic nuclear forces was consisted of about 11,000 nuclear warheads. The Americans had slightly more than that. 10,770 - there was almost the parity but er there were mid range er missiles had been scrapped by then.

(22:23:27) Q

Let me bring you back to that most tense night when you were in that secret bunker. What was the psychological atmo' - what was the atmosphere - what was the - what did people feel - what did people talk about?

(22:24:24) A

Er speaking about the morale of the er staff well of course I can't speak on behalf of everybody else but er as to the people er who were in that command point of the strategic missile forces er we were tense. Er well everyone felt extra irresponsibility er everyone was very er well together but of course the tension was not as high as

during the er Cuban missile crisis.
(22:25:20) Er we knew that the NATO
were doing an exercise but not
really preparing for the nuclear
blow although of course there we
couldn't fully eliminate the chance
er that er the nuclear strike might
have been delivered. So we were in
the state of er readiness - we we
had to be ready to react of all the
sudden unplanned changes if the NATO
exercise had gone not according to
plan or if there had been some signs
of extra activities which might have
manifested that a real strike might
have been delivered. The groo
because our information was coming
from groo did not give us er such er
warning. This is why we can't say
that we were sitting and waiting for
the strike to be delivered. It was
er heightened er vigilance but it
wasn't er well state of expecting of
waiting for the strike to be
(22:26:41) delivered. But this is
my personal impression - I cannot
speak for everyone who was there.
But er I can say that we didn't have
er that er fear - I was involved in
the Cuban missile crisis and I was
in Cuba er during that crisis and
when er in 19 er October 1962 we
were there - we were really waiting

for that any minute we would be given the order to launch missiles and we were waiting for the American invasion to start dropping bombs on us. So 1983 was er the atmosphere was different.

(22:28:02) Q Was the picture the same in other forces?

(22:28:19) A Er I already said that er in the strategic er armed - in the strategic missiles the er state of our heightened alert was carried out in accordance with the orders of the general staff which er lets me assume that er if er we received such orders a similar orders were received by commanders of other forces. And er with high degree of certainty we can assume that er the er - we're in the similar state of alert. Of course the - well actual actions that were taken might have been different but the fact of increasing the sea based and air based er nuclear missiles were the same.

No he didn't say 50% in this time.

(22:29:24)

I don't - I cannot give you the
percentage because I just - I'm not
in a position to give figures.

(22:29:34)

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